LEAP

INTO

KNIGHT

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A Quantum Leap/Forever Knight Novella

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By Sandy Hall and Sharon Wisdom

As the blue electric tingling faded, Dr. Samuel Beckett found himself surrounded by loud, pulsing music and writhing bodies. Although the light was dim, and it took him a moment to focus his eyes, he could tell he was standing next to a bar. A bartender with punk-styled hair, a gold earring in one ear and wearing black leather stood behind the bar pouring drinks out of wine bottles.

The people dancing in the room about him were dressed in everything from jeans to evening wear, with black being the predominate color. From the style of the clothing and decor, Sam guessed it was either late eighties or early nineties. Looking down, he saw that he wore a black leather jacket over a black t-shirt and jeans. ***At least,*** he thought, ***he didn't have to worry about not fitting in.***

Feeling thirsty, he saw that he did not have a drink sitting in front of him. He was just about to order a beer from the bartender, when a dark haired woman, holding a wine glass slipped in front of him. Her dress, matching the ebony of her hair, was obviously expensive, long and slinky, low cut in the front, and fit her perfect figure like the elbow length black satin gloves she wore. A black velvet choker was wrapped around her slender neck. She was definitely, as Al would call it, a class act.

The contrast of the dark material against her pale skin was highly sensual. He swallowed, trying to still the immediate attraction he felt toward the woman. While he was no novice when it came to sexual attraction, he couldn't remember a time when he had been so quickly drawn to a woman. He couldn't take his eyes off her full red lips. ***What was going on here?***

"Nicki," she said, her voice was silky with a sultry French accent as she moved even closer to him. "Thanks for waiting." She looked up at him underneath thick black lashes, her eyes full of sensuous promise. His breath caught in his throat as she pressed a long languid kiss on his lips.

"Delicious," she whispered, moving from his lips to the side of his neck up to his ear. "If only we had more time." She gave his ear a sharp nip, the exquisite pain adding to the already raging fire racing along his veins.

"Have a sip," she urged, leaning back and putting the wine glass containing a dark ruby liquid into his hand. "I made a new mixture to celebrate the new

decor."

Sam wasn't sure he should drink the fluid in the glass without knowing what it was, but there was something about it that drew him, something that told him the red liquid would satisfy his now intense thirst. Dark, pulsing music filled his ears, his very soul. Swallowing hard, he found himself unable to look away from the woman's mesmerizing eyes. Hungry. He was so hungry for...

"Nicholas, you know you want it," the woman said softly, moving nearer and slipping her fingers about his to encourage him to lift the glass. As she brought the glass closer, he licked his lips nervously.

"I--" he began, the indrawn breath bringing the scent of the liquid to him with an intensity that was a slam directly to some primal sense that had laid long latent. It seared him with a need that went far beyond any other desire he had ever known.

He could smell wine, mixed with... ***That scent, what was it?*** It struck a chord deep inside him, revulsion combined with an undescribable attraction. He ***wanted*** it, that fluid.

As his hunger grew, his senses heightened. Even through the incredible din of the music, he could hear clearly the conversations going on around him. The dim light of the nightclub seemed as bright as day, as though the darkness had simply fallen away.

The music embraced him. Its beat called to him. It was a living thing. A human heart beating. Calling.

The woman dipped her suddenly bare fingertip in the glass. How she got the glove off without Sam noticing, he wasn't sure. "Just a taste," she tempted. "It can't hurt." Glistening in the smoky light of the bar, the red fluid covering her finger called to him.

Unable to resist, he opened his mouth, his eyes on hers as she put her finger to his mouth. The taste was indescribable, like nectar of the gods.

It made him want more. It was like drinking lemonade on a hot summer's day, knowing that no matter how much he drank, his thirst would remain unquenched. And yet, it had absolutely nothing to do with the sweet innocence of drinking lemonade on a bright, sunlit afternoon.

Opening his eyes, he looked directly at the glass in her hands. Unconsciously, he licked his lips, trying to catch any stray drop. He wanted it, but didn't know how to ask.

She took the problem out of his hands by saying, "See? I told you it was good. Would you like some more?"

"Yes," he said, hoarsely, nodding. She released the

glass, and he had to force himself not to gulp it all down at once. He took a swallow, and shuddered faintly at the intensity. It seemed to go directly to his head and was even more intoxicating than ordinary wine. He took another mouthful, savoring it a brief moment before the compulsion made him swallow. ***More***. His vision became even sharper, the dim light of the nightclub seeming almost painfully bright to his eyes. ***What did it have in it, some type of drug?***

"Slow down, Nicholas," the woman said, placing a warning hand on his arm. "If you gulp like that, you'll get drunk. And we both know what happened the last time you drank too much." Her voice was gentle, but her warning clear.

Was Nicholas some type of addict? Sam took a deep breath and forced himself to give the glass to the woman. "Here," he said shakily. "You'd better take it back. I don't think I can handle this right now." It was the wise thing to do. Yet, it was all he could do to keep himself from snatching the glass back and draining it.

"Are you all right?" There was worry in the woman's voice.

Sam nodded. He didn't want to raise her suspicions that he wasn't Nicholas. "I'm just hungry," he said.

"Well, if you wouldn't half starve yourself with that--what is it that you call it?--bovine--diet of yours, then you wouldn't be starving." She ran a finger down his cheek. "Although I like you a little hungry. It gives you that lean, ravenous look." Her eyes clouded with sensual memories. "Remember that night in Paris, mon ami? We spent it feeding each other. Why don't we do that anymore?"

Sam was lost as to an answer. He couldn't tell her why, but the look on her face made him want to do more than just kiss her. He wanted to carry her away from this crowd, to kiss her luscious lips before moving down to her slender neck, to.... She interrupted his thought before it was fully formed, answering her own question. "It's that job of yours," she said petulantly. "I know you're trying to repay your debt to society, but surely, you could find a better way than being a police detective."

Ah, a piece of the puzzle falling in place. The man he had leapt into was a police detective, evidently because he felt guilty about something. His hunger slipped slowly into the background, as Sam considered the possibilities. "Well," he hedged, hoping for more clues, "it seemed a good idea at the time. Helping people, I mean."

"People!" the woman said, disgustedly. "I have

never understood why they mean so much to you. They are no better than the cattle of which you are so fond."

Now Sam was really confused, but before he could comment, the woman waved her hand and said lightly, "I don't have time to philosophize with you now, Nicki. I have a club to run. It's almost closing time." She kissed him deeply, reawakening the desire he had felt earlier.

Then, brushing his cheek playfully, she said, "You had best get home, it's almost dawn. Thanks again for taking care of that little problem here at the Raven and for bringing me back." She smiled before turning and melting away into the dim club, leaving him staring after her.

The loud music assaulting his ears, he decided to try to find a quieter place. Spying the exit sign, he was making his way over to it when he plowed directly through the image of Al Calavicci's hologram as it appeared before him.

"Hey, Sam!" the Quantum Leap Project Observer protested, "Slow down, will ya?."

"Al!" Sam said in a loud whisper, causing several heads to turn in his direction. He nodded toward the exit, trying to be inconspicuous, but firm at the same time.

"Ah, Sam," Al protested. "I just *got* here. It looks like a great place to pick up women." He turned to look about him with glee, his eyes widening with appreciation. "Look at that number over there, in the red dress. Well," he amended in satisfaction, "I guess you could call it a dress, although I've seen more material on a body at the beach."

Casting Al an exasperated glance over his shoulder, Sam pushed the door open and walked out onto the sidewalk. Overhead, a large sign proclaimed the club's name to be the Raven. At one side of the door, a large, broad shouldered man stood watch.

Al regarded the guard, eyes narrowing as he sized up the heavily muscled man. "Big dude, ain't he?" he observed dryly.

Sam nodded and the bouncer/doorman, evidently taking the gesture as meant for him, nodded back. Taking the keys out of his pocket, the physicist found they were an old style Cadillac set. Looking around, he spied a green, early model Cadillac convertible underneath a street lamp and headed toward it. Hoping the doorman was not looking should he have the wrong car, he slipped the key in the lock and was relieved to feel it unlock the door. ***Now,*** he drew a deep breath, ***where to?***

The Observer, who had followed him was raving over the car. "Hey! This is a 1962 Cadillac convertible, in

mint condition. Do you have any idea how much this car is *worth*? They don't make them like this any more."

"Al, can you just tell me who I am and where I live?" Sam interrupted impatiently as he opened the door and climbed in the car. "I'm tired and I want to get some sleep."

"Hold your horses," the hologram said as he appeared to walk through the door and sit beside Sam. Rapidly pressing keys on the handlink seemed to get him nothing more than protesting tones from the glowing instrument. Al shook his head, "Well, it's March 3rd, 1993, but other than that, Ziggy's not talking. Something's really got her circuits tied in knots and I haven't had time to go to the Waiting Room for any first hand info. Why don't you check your wallet?"

Patting his pockets, Sam first felt the outline of a gun in a shoulder holster. Grimacing, he ignored it, and reached in his jacket pocket and withdrew a black leather wallet. Opening it up, he saw a shiny badge. Looking at it closer, he read, "Toronto Metropolitan Police Department. Nicholas Knight. I'm in Canada. She said I was a police officer."

"Who?"

"The woman in there," he pointed back to the club. "I didn't get her name. Slender, dark hair, French accent." As if in an afterthought, he added, "I think she owns the place."

Casting a thoughtful glance at Sam after a check of the handlink, the Observer said only, "The Raven's owner is listed as Jeannette DuBois."

Sam slipped out the driver's license and read off the information, "Nicholas Knight, born January 1st, 1958, address, 101 Gateway Lane, Toronto." He looked at the accompanying picture and compared it to the man in the mirror. "Funny, he doesn't look 35 years old."

Looking up at the sky, starting to show its early dawn palate of colors, Sam felt an odd, almost instinctual, need to get to a place of safety. Somehow, it seemed important to get home--and right now Knight's home would have to do. "101 Gateway Lane," he repeated. "How do I get there?"

"Why don't you check the glove compartment? A cop would probably carry around a map."

As Sam leaned over and opened the door to the glove compartment, the Observer turned back to the handlink. "Ziggy, access Toronto's data base and give me Knight's history." He shook the handlink, making it squeal in high pitch protest. "I don't care what you're doing, you hybridized piece of computerized junk, give me the information." He thumped the handlink once, then studied the flashing display.

As Sam pulled out the street map and opened it up, Al continued, waving his cigar as if in satisfaction at the readout. "Knight's been on the force since 1989, working the night shift. It looks like he basically works alone, but he sometimes works with a partner named Don Schanke," he stopped, took a puff on his cigar and went on, "Schanke, I knew a guy named Schanke, once. He was a used car salesman, a real smuck. He tried to sell me a used sports car, but I could tell it was a lemon. Oh, it looked nice on the outside but..."

"So, why am I here?" Sam interrupted the Observer, starting the big car and pulling out onto the road. He had memorized the quickest route to Knight's house, and felt confident that he could easily get there, but his hands were tense on the steering wheel. At best, Al's habit of reminiscing was annoying, but with Sam's nerves stretched taunt as bow strings, he was ready to lash out. He forced himself to take a deep breath. Soon, he would be home and safe. But...safe from what?

Al shrugged, waving his ever present cigar. "We don't know for sure yet. I'll go find out what Darcie's gotten from our visitor."

"Darcie?" Sam asked, wondering why the name sounded familiar.

"You remember, our Project MD? Verbena's on vacation, so Darcie's playing shrink for her."

A vision of a red headed woman came to his mind and for some strange reason she was riding a motorcycle. He shook his head. "Does she ride a motorcycle?"

Al smiled, "Yeah, that's her. Darcie, the motorcycle maniac. She rides her bike at all hours of the day and night, but she's one smart doctor. She did the implants, remember? Anyway, I'll see what I can find out. If it's nothing immediately pressing, I'll check back with you after you've had some sleep. Maybe," Al shook his head reprovingly as he called up the Imaging Chamber door, "it'll improve your disposition." Quickly, before the other man could reply, he hit a final key and disappeared, leaving Sam alone in the rapidly lightening car.

Sam shook his head and concentrated on getting home.

* * *

One moment, Nick had been standing next to the bar in the Raven, waiting to talk to Jeannette and the next he found himself encompassed by a blinding blue-white light. A burning agony, such as he had never felt before, twisted through his body. The dancing crowd surrounding him had acted as if nothing was wrong. Oblivious to his pain, they continued dancing their long

eternity away.

He had tried to speak, as he saw Jeannette approaching. The agony froze him and he could not warn her to stay away. ***Was this what it was like to experience final destruction?*** was his last thought before he descended into a yawning black pit that opened beneath him. Darkness engulfed him.

When consciousness finally returned, it brought with it light. But there was no pain--yet. Nearly paralyzed with the memory of the agony, he lay very still and cast about him for clues. Where was he?

The room was all white, and ruthlessly bright. It couldn't be Heaven, not with his track record. And, unless LaCroix came walking in a door, it couldn't be Hell. Purgatory, perhaps, a stopping off place before he was brought before God's throne to answer for his deeds.

A chill of terror traced down his spine, drawing a shudder from him. The thought of judgement far surpassed his earlier fear that had kept him motionless. This couldn't really be happening, could it?

Briefly, he wondered if he was lost in some dream from the past. Had he lost touch with reality so completely? Looking about him, he decided that he had never seen anyplace quite like where he was, unless it was in a science fiction movie. It was not a waking dream, then. But, the idea that he was dead and waiting for judgement lingered. ***Where was he?***

Forcing himself to remain calm, he took stock of his situation and realized he was lying down. Trying to sit up, he discovered he was restrained and a renewed sense of panic began to grow in his chest. Desperately, he tried to use his strength to break the straps holding him to the bed, but found that he could not.

His body felt weak, and slow to respond. Where ever he was, he had an increasingly uncomfortable feeling that he would need all of his strength.

Where was he? Who had brought him here...and how long would it be before he would be able to feed again?

"Oh, good, you're awake."

Nick turned his head quickly toward the voice. He hadn't even heard anyone come in. ***What was the matter with him?!*** The voice's owner was a slender red haired woman, dressed in a emerald dress which highlighted the green of her eyes, and a white lab coat. A husky young man in what looked to be some sort of military uniform stood at attention behind her. This couldn't be purgatory, unless they had beautiful women staffing it--and armed guards to back them up.

"Where am I?" Nick demanded. "Why am I tied down?"

The woman came a few steps closer, saying, "Calm

down, and I'll try to explain. My name is Darcie Scott and I'm a doctor." She looked at the monitors over the bed. "We just restrained you until you were awake, so you wouldn't fall out of bed."

Yeah, right, Nick thought as he watched her study the monitors, ***and to see how compliant I was going to be when I woke up. Well, two can play that game.***

When she asked, "Can you tell me your name?" he considered the question for a moment. He could think of no reason he should not tell her. Perhaps if he did, she would decide it was safe to let him up.

"My name is Nick Knight," he answered sharply, "I'm a police detective."

Reaching out, she began to release the straps that bound him. Nick was cautiously hopeful that things were not as bad as they seemed. As the woman continued her questions, the last of the restraints came free. "You have an accent I can't place," she said. "Where are you from?"

Unobtrusively, the guard took a step forward the moment Nick was free. The detective had no doubt that the burly man would not hesitate to jump on him if he made a wrong move. He was going to have to watch his step very, very carefully here.

Slowly, Nick sat up on the side of the bed as the doctor took a step away. "Where are we?" he countered her question, rubbing his arms where the straps had rubbed when he had strained against them. "You tell me something, I'll tell you something in return."

The woman smiled. "All right. That's fair enough. You're in the Waiting Room of a top secret project. I can't, for obvious reasons, tell you the exact location, but it's somewhere in New Mexico."

"New Mexico? In the States?" he said, incredulously. "How did I get here?"

"It might help if you tell me where you were."

"Toronto. I was in a nightclub to talk with my friend, Jeannette, who, by the way, will be worried that I've just disappeared. What did you do, drug me?" He didn't mention that he only drank animal blood, and it would be virtually impossible for anyone to drug him. Anyway, he hadn't drunk anything in the Raven; at least he didn't think he had.

The doctor shook her head. "No, you haven't been drugged."

Nick regarded her closely, trying to decide if she was telling the truth. She did not seem the type to lie. The green eyes were clear and open, strangely reminding him of Natalie and he felt an instinctive desire to trust her.

Cautioning himself that he was being held prisoner

in a situation he knew very little about, he asked, "What does a United States top secret project want with me?"

"We believe that you or someone close to you is in danger. Do you have any idea who it could be?"

Danger? "I'm a police officer," he answered, studying her carefully, "and most of the people close to me are involved in police work." Deliberately, he chose not to also tell her that some of his oldest friends were vampires. "We are in danger every day that we go to work. There are several people who would like to take any of us out of the picture."

"Tell me about the people you work with."

Nick looked into her face, and the fact that she met his gaze steadily helped him decide that he would trust her at least with that much information. "My partner's Don Schanke. He's, well, kind of hard to describe. He's actually a pretty good guy, but he can be difficult to...uh...take sometimes."

Despite his situation, he half chuckled at the memory. "As a matter of fact, when the captain told me that he was going to be my partner, I begged someone to shoot me." He shook his head and admitted reluctantly, "Actually, I couldn't ask for a better partner, except," he shrugged, "maybe one that didn't smoke like a chimney and make sleazy remarks about women all the time."

Unexpectedly, Darcie laughed in what seemed genuine amusement, causing Nick to raise an inquiring eyebrow at her. "Your description just reminds me of someone I know," she said, still smiling. "Go on. You mentioned something about a captain?"

"Captain Stonetree. He's a regular guy. A little overweight, balding on top. He runs the precinct."

"Anything going on in their lives right now? Anyone specific that might have a grudge against them?"

Nick laughed. "I *told* you they are police officers. I could probably name two dozen people that would like to put all three of us away, but most of them are behind bars."

"Okay, what about women? You mentioned a Jeannette."

Nick tensed warily. Jeannette, he did *not* want to discuss. That could lead into definitely stormy waters. "Don't worry about her. She can take care of herself. I'd be more worried about Nat."

"Nat?"

"Natalie Lambert, our Medical Examiner. She's single, lives alone. If I'm gone for any period of time, she's going to worry."

"Don't be concerned. She won't even know you're gone." She paused, watching him closely. "Dr. Beckett

has taken your place."

"My place? How?" Nick asked suspiciously.

Darcie hesitated for a few moments, then evidently came to a decision. "Come over here and look into this mirror. That might help explain things."

A mirror. He knew that sometimes he could see his own reflection, but there were still times when it was hazy. What if this were one of those times? Would the look on her face turn to horror? Would she restrain him again, take blood samples, experiment on him? A horrible thought occurred to him. ***Had she already taken blood?*** Did she already know the truth about him? Was this all an elaborate deception to expose him?

Looking sharply at her, Nick doubted it; there was something about Darcie that made him want to trust her, confide in her. Did she remind him of Natalie because she was a doctor? Maybe that was a trait all female doctors shared. The ability to put people at ease, so they would trust them. Maybe. Somehow, Nick didn't think that was all of it.

He got up slowly and followed her over to a low bench. A mirror was recessed into what looked much like a table of some sort. Bending over, he was shocked to see a reflection of an early middle aged man, wearing a white jumpsuit. The man the mirror reflected was handsome, with brown hair bearing a white streak over one brow. Warm hazel eyes gazed back at him from the silvery surface.

"That's what I look like?!" Nick said in shock.

"No, that's not what you look like. That's what Dr. Beckett looks like. Well," she added hesitantly, "what he ***normally*** looks like. Right now, he looks like you and you look like him."

"That's what you meant by taking my place!" Nick exclaimed in horror. "You mean he's stolen my body?"

"Now, don't get excited," Darcie said soothingly, casting a glance toward the door as if she expected company. "We're not exactly sure that he actually has your body. Our computer..."

"You tell me that some mad scientist has taken my body and then you say not to get excited?" Nick interrupted. He could hear his voice rise in pitch. He forced himself to lower his voice to his most intimidating interrogation tone. He looked in her eyes and tried to call on his hypnotic power. ***Where was the sound of her heart beat?*** "Just who's in charge of this project?"

"Dr. Beckett," she answered calmly, but without the flat tone that usually accompanied a hypnotic state. "But since he's been away, Admiral Calavicci has been in charge."

"So, where is he?"
"Right now, he's checking in with Sam. He'll be coming back soon."
"How soon? It's a long flight from Toronto to New Mexico," he snapped. "And I want my body back!" Her composed demeanor was starting to get on his nerves. How could she remain so calm?
"We have the distance problem under control," the doctor assured him with an enigmatic smile. "The real difficulty is that you can't get back to your life until Sam changes what he's supposed to change."
"Changes?" Nick asked, confused. "What do you mean?"
Darcie hesitated, and exchanged a look with the guard, before looking back at Nick. "I'm not sure if you're going to believe me, and you probably won't remember when you go back home. You see, Sam leaps into different people's lives to fix what went wrong the first time."
"The first time?" Nick repeated, noting the look of reserve that came into her eyes as he caught the significance of the phrase. "You mean he's gone back in time?" he demanded in sudden understanding. "What year is it here?"
She sighed and said, "I can't tell you that, but it's somewhere in your future."
This was almost too fantastic for Nick to believe. Was he was caught in some late night science fiction movie like ***Invasion of the Body Snatchers?*** Time travel? No one would believe it. But then again, not many people would believe in vampires either. He thought of Natalie again. She'd love it. Nick decided to take Dr. Scott at face value, for the moment. "So, why has he *leaped* into me? What went wrong in my life?"
The doctor breathed an obvious sigh of relief and Nick had the impression that not many of her 'visitors' accepted their explanations so readily. "We're not sure yet. We're checking your history right now with our computer."
Suddenly, Nick had an alarming thought. If 'they' knew about what was going to happen to him in his future, how much did they know about his past, his 800 years of past? He thought Larry Merlin had been thorough when he added a fake history to the data base of the computer, but there were pictures, books, and newspaper articles. How sophisticated was their computer? To be able to send someone back into the past, it had to be something pretty impressive.
The red head continued, "With your help, we should be able to pin down the problem fairly quickly. You seem more lucid than most of the leapees we've had.

Usually, they can't remember their own names."

Nick laughed ironically, thinking of his eight centuries of memories. "I have very extensive recall." He regarded Darcie thoughtfully. "If you know what I was doing in 1993, then you should know what I'm doing now, in your time, right?"

Darcie shook her head. "Even when Ziggy comes up with that information, I can't tell you, I'm sorry. It's the rules. It might change your history."

Nick nodded sarcastically, "I understand. It's okay for Dr. Beckett to change my history, but not for me."

Darcie opened her mouth to reply, but Nick forestalled her, shaking his head in resignation. "Don't worry. I do understand. Information about the future could be disastrous in the wrong hands."

Drawn to the mirror again, he considered all the evidence he had so far. He looked at the reflection that was, at least for a time, his. Could it be that he had become this human?

Was he, after all these years, finally mortal? Beyond the woman's words, his physical reactions convinced him it could be true; his inability to break the bonds, his muted senses; he had not heard the doctor enter the room. Still, there was a way he could be more sure. Resolved, he closed his eyes to blot out the sight of the unfamiliar reflection and silently reached for the vampire within him.

There was no answer to his call, no extension of his fangs, no throbbing heartbeat of his prey, no hunger for the sweet, salty blood of the attractive women near him. Nothing.

Perhaps, he *was* finally mortal! Mortal! Able to eat and walk in the sunlight. He wouldn't have to rely on blood for substance. He was free of the beast!

Hard upon the thought, came the realization that if he were human, what did that make Dr. Beckett? How would the scientist deal with being a vampire; the sudden onslaught to his senses, the seductive beating of a human heart across the distance of a room, the enticing aroma of blood just under vulnerable mortal skin? How would he deal with...the Hunger?

Slowly, he opened his eyes and turned back to the doctor. He had no choice but to trust Darcie with his secret. Without warning, Dr. Beckett would not be able to resist the temptations of being a vampire. He wouldn't be able to keep the secret Nick had hidden for 800 years, let alone protect whomever he had to protect. He would just have to hope that Darcie would be worthy of his trust.

"Dr. Scott," he said quietly. "There's something I have to tell you."

* * *

After he left the Cadillac in the garage of Nick's loft, Sam found himself facing a security lock. Feeling an uncanny sense of the arrival of dawn with a need to be inside and safe, he looked at the door with a growing sense of anxiety. He wanted to be in, ***now***!

Forcing himself to stay calm, he told himself he would just consider the lock a puzzle to be solved. ***Now what,*** he asked himself, ***could be the key?*** Looking through Nick's wallet, he tried different sequences of numbers. Finally, he hit on the right combination: the last four numerals of his, or rather Nick's, telephone number.

Taking the freight elevator, Sam went to the second floor. Opening the sliding door, he found himself in a large open apartment, converted from some type of warehouse. A piano was nestled below red painted stairs leading to a second floor. The windows were uncovered, the light muted as it came in, but still it seemed much too bright for comfort. He looked them over, trying to figure out how to close them. Spying a remote, he picked it up, pushed a button marked 'Windows' and a heavy metal covering came down to close out the newborn day. Turning to the next window, he repeated the process, feeling a bewildering, vast sense of relief when the last was down and the room was only lighted by muted lamps.

He took off his jacket and hung it over a large black leather chair before taking off his shoulder holster, laying it carefully on the nearby table. Taking out the handgun, he brought it up to study it. It felt heavy in his hands, the handle cool against his palm. Looking up, he saw his reflection in the mirror, near the door. A young appearing man with dark blonde hair stared back with somehow penetrating blue eyes. The guy needed a shave, he mused before looking back at the gun.

Handguns made him nervous. He knew how to use them. In fact, he had become proficient in their use, but he still didn't like them. They were different than the 22 caliber rifle his father had taught him to use when he was twelve. Rifles were for shooting game or chasing off predatory animals, but he couldn't get over the feeling that pistols were for a different game, the human kind. He only hoped that he wouldn't have to use this gun on this leap.

The hunger was still with him, making him feel almost weak. He made sure the safety was on the gun and placed it carefully in the holster. Walking over to the kitchenette, he opened the refrigerator and was


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disappointed to only find several bottles of wine. The cupboards turned out even more bare than the refrigerator. The idea of going back out into the day to get something to eat was vastly unappealing.

Sighing, he took a wine glass from the open shelf next to the refrigerator. ***Maybe one glass wouldn't hurt him***, he thought. ***Perhaps it would help him get to sleep.*** He opened the refrigerator and removed a bottle of the red wine.

Looking through the drawers, he couldn't find a corkscrew, and the sense of hunger grew until it was almost a physical pain. Frustrated, he yanked in disgust at the cork with his fingers and was amazed when it slipped out easily.

As he poured the liquid into the glass, he saw that this wine was thicker than that at the nightclub. Surprisingly, it didn't repel him, though he had a dim sense that perhaps it should. He was just so ***hungry***.

Drawn, he brought the glass up and sniffed. There was no hint of alcohol, but that other scent was there...the one from the club. Taking the glass over to the light, he studied it. The color, the smell--he took a small sip--the salty taste. The same indescribable hunger from the club warred with the analytical scientist in him as he tried to identify the liquid. Taking another sip, he had to fight against the urge to drain the whole glass, then the bottle. ***What was this guy? An alcoholic?***

Maybe he shouldn't... As he hastily returned the glass to the counter, it slipped through his fingers, shattering into pieces. Making a noise of displeasure deep in his throat, he reached to pick up the first of the shards. Too fast to prevent, the sharp piece slipped in his hand, cutting his finger. At once, the blood dripped from his finger and mixing with the fluid from the glass. Red mingled with red and, eyes widening as he regarded the glistening drops, he finally placed the fluid. The scent, the viscousness, the saltiness...it was blood!

Suppressing the instinctive urge to gag at the realization that he had actually drank the stuff, he fell back a step. Horrified, he considered the discovery and its possibilities as he stared at the mess on the counter with wide eyes. ***What was Nick doing with blood in his refrigerator? In wine bottles?***

Before he could speculate further, the door buzzer sounded, drawing him from his uneasy thoughts. He looked around for something to stop the blood, found a towel, wrapped it around his hand, then went over to where a video screen displayed a woman with dark hair waiting at the outside door.

"Hey Nick, let me in," the woman said. "It's Natalie."

Natalie? Sam wasn't sure he wanted visitors, but decided he didn't have any choice. He released the door lock, then went back over to the sink. As he unwrapped the hand, he saw that the bleeding had already stopped. Avoiding looking at the bottle on the counter, he turned on the water in the sink and was washing his hands when Natalie pulled aside the metal elevator door and walked in.

"Hey, Nick, I got worried when you didn't call back," Natalie said easily as if sure of her welcome. Walking over to the sink, she put down the sack she held in one hand. "I brought hamburgers and French fries," she continued, breaking off when she saw the broken glass and blood on the counter.

From the corner of his eye, Sam saw her shoot him a disapproving glance as he studiously concentrated on washing his hands. But, it didn't look like avoiding the issue was going to keep her from commenting on it, though she looked more annoyed than shocked.

"Nick," she chided with an air of an old friend who had the right to take him to task. "I've told you and told you that you're going to have to stop drinking this stuff." She picked up the bottle. "I can't help you come over, if you won't help yourself."

Come over? Incredibly, Sam had the urge to snatch the bottle away from her, but controlled the impulse. ***What the hell was the matter with him?*** "Sorry," he said, hunching his shoulders and feeling uncomfortably out of control for a reason he didn't fully understand. Whoever this woman was, she seemed awfully accepting of the fact that he--that *Nick*--drank blood.

Natalie looked at him more closely. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"Just a cut. I can take care of it."

"What are you, a doctor now?" she asked in mild sarcasm, reaching for his hand. "Oh, I forgot. That was during the Civil War." She examined the small cut. "Good, you're already healing. I guess there are some advantages to your condition."

Confused, Sam looked down to see that she was right. ***Why was she talking about the Civil War as if he'd been a part of it? Why did his wound look like it was several days old? What condition? Why did he feel he was the only sane person in a world gone crazy?***

Taking his silence as agreement, Natalie turned him toward the living room. "You go sit down and I'll clean up this mess. You look awful."

Sam gratefully went over to the sofa that matched the easy chair and sat down. Silently, he watched the

woman take care of the remains of the glass and wipe up the blood. Finally, drying her hands on a towel, she walked over to where Sam was sitting.

"Thanks," he said tentatively, indicating the sink and wondering what was to come next.

"That's okay," she returned, sitting down. "Sometimes, I think that's my vocation in life, saving you from yourself." She smiled, punching him lightly on the arm. "That, and finding a cure for vampirism, but I guess you could say they were one in the same thing."

Vampirism? But that meant...nuh uh, no way. He had already gone through this scenario once. There were no such things as vampires. Only people with fake fangs and delusions of bloodsucking. ***But why was there blood in his refrigerator? Why had he wanted-- no--needed, to get home before the sun came up? Why were there metal shutters on Nick's windows? And, most damning of all, why could he hear Natalie's heart beating?***

He couldn't be a vampire! This was all some sort of delusion Nick suffered and it was so strong it was shading over to him. Sam swallowed hard and willed himself to hold onto that thought. It was synergy, like with Billie Jean. It was synergy, and that was all. It had to be.

"Nick? You okay?" Natalie asked, obviously concerned. "You just went white. I mean really white, even for you."

Sam pulled himself together with an effort. "I'm...fine." ***For someone who was just told they were a vampire and nearly believed it.*** "Um, could you explain this...cure again?"

"Nick, we've been over this and over this." She threw up her hands in exasperation, then gave in with a sigh.

"Okay," she said, "one more time. It's my theory that it's the blood, even though it's bovine, that is keeping you from becoming human. If you could stop drinking it, and start eating food, I think you could come over."

It all made sort of a crazy sense, the final pieces of the puzzle falling into place: the 'wine' at the club, Jeannette urging him to drink it. Jeannette. Did she believe she was a vampire, too? Thinking of her, and the primal appeal of the glass she had offered him, Sam could well understand why Nick was having trouble resisting the call of the blood if he had such temptations and someone who shared them.

He cleared his throat uneasily. "How would you suggest I stop...craving the blood?" Maybe that's why he was here, to get Nick over the worst of his craving so Natalie, who seemed to be some sort of doctor, could

help him. She had to be just humoring him to gain his belief in this cure. She couldn't really believe he was a vampire--could she?

"First step," she answered without hesitation as if she had said it many times before, "get rid of the blood. Second step, eat. If it's rare steak or French fries with lots of ketchup, I don't care, just get some food in you. And," she said in an afterthought, making Sam wonder if she could read minds, "stay away from the Raven."

"Okay, I'll try," he said, as she got up and went over and retrieved the sack from the counter. "Natalie?"

"What?"

"Why did you call?"

"Oh, I just wanted to let you know the results to the Miller case. It looks like a positive match between the suspect's tissue type and the skin found under the victims fingernails. The report will be on your desk in the morning." She opened the sack and took out the food. "Here, have a French fry."

Uncertain, Sam accepted the offered food, took a bite and chewed. It tasted like cardboard, but then that made sense. If Nick hadn't had solid food for a while, it may take a bit of getting used to, but he could do it. How hard could it be? Resolutely, he forced himself not to choke as he swallow the dry food and asked wryly in resignation, "Where's the ketchup?"

* * *

Darcie caught up with the admiral as he was striding down the hall. "Al, we need to talk."

"What's up?" he asked, as he thumped his handlink once, and placed it in his pocket. "Did you get any info from our visitor in the Waiting Room?"

"You could say that. Where's Sam?"

"Back at his apartment. He's pulling the night shift, so he's going to bed. Why?"

"That's good. It should buy us some time," Darcie said. Before the admiral could ask again, she suggested, "Al, why don't we talk in my office?" Not waiting for an answer, she lead the way.

"What is it?" Al asked in exasperation, as soon they were in her neat office with the door shut closed behind them.

"Sit down, Al," Darcie ordered, then sat down herself. As soon as the man was seated, she asked, "How did Sam seem to you?"

Al shrugged, "About like usual, maybe a little more testy. Why? What's the mystery?"

"I had a talk with Nick in the Waiting Room. He was very cooperative."

"That's good. So what'd you get?"

Darcie gave him a rundown on Nick's description of the more mundane aspects of his life, his associates and friends. Then added, "I've already fed Ziggy the info. We're just waiting for her reply."

She hesitated and Al prompted, "And..."

Sighing, Darcie decided there was no easy way to tell the superstitious admiral the rest of it. "Now, don't get excited, Al."

His narrow-eyed look was suspicious. "Why would I get excited?"

"Well," she decided she may as well take the plunge and say it, "Nick claims he is a vampire, and..."

At the word 'vampire', Al's eyes widened. "Vampire!" he exclaimed. "You've got to be joking. There are no such things as vampires. At least," he shrugged uncomfortably, "that's what Sam made me say I believed after we met up with that Covington guy." He suppressed a theatrical shudder. "Don't tell me you're going to try to convince me otherwise now."

"Either Nick's a vampire," she answered evenly, disbelieving of her own calm, "or he believes totally that he is. He seems pretty coherent for a leapee."

"You mean," Al added wryly, "for some sicko who goes around biting people on the neck."

"Nick does not bite anyone on the neck," Darcie snapped. Then, hearing the defensiveness in her voice, wondered if she had allowed herself to become biased in this case. "He drinks his nourishment out of bottles and it's not human, but cow's blood."

"Oh, yuck!" Al exclaimed in disgust. "As if it makes a whole lot of difference."

"It makes a difference," she said quietly, "to Nick."

"Oh, great, a bloodsucker with a conscience. You're not really buying into this, are you, Darcie?" His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Or is it just 'Nick' you're buying into? He hasn't bitten you and turned you into some sort of love slave, has he?"

"No," Darcie said patiently. "He hasn't bitten me." Only the fact that the admiral had a tendency to project his own motives on other people kept her from flaring angrily. In her years of working with Al she had learned the best response to such a remark was a cool one. "I admit I feel empathy for Nick, but it doesn't cloud my professional judgment."

"Yeah, right," Al said, skeptically. "Okay, you say, this 'Nick' is a vampire or thinks he is. Let's say he is. It won't make any difference to Sam, right?

I mean, it's his body that's leaping around. He's not going to have to drink blood or anything?" he hesitated, eyeing Darcie closely. "Is he?"

"I don't know," the doctor said thoughtfully. "Nick's vital signs seem perfectly human to me. When Sam leaped into the blind piano player, he could see, so that made us believe that it was his body that was doing the leaping." She got up and started pacing as she strove to put into words all that she had already considered.

"But," she shrugged expressively, "Billy Jo and the baby disappearing from the Waiting Room changed everything. Sam had cravings, nausea, the whole bit." Nodding at the silent admiral, she said firmly, "You said yourself that you saw a baby's head crowning in that delivery. There's no way a man's body can physically deliver a baby. There may be some synergy to deal with in this leap. Sam very well may experience some of Nick's...idiosyncrasies."

Al snorted. "That's one way of saying it. I just can't wait to go tell Sam 'I've got a vampire in the Waiting Room.' Last time I told him that, he nearly bit my head off." He shuddered. "I'm just glad I'm a hologram."

"Al," Darcie said chidingly.

"Okay," he said, getting to his feet. "I'd better get back to Sam before he bites anyone or turns into a bat or something."

"Nick says vampires turning into bats are myths," Darcie said, keeping her smile hidden with an effort.

"Well, that's a comfort," Al said sarcastically.

Darcie refused to react to the jibe. "Didn't you say that Sam was going to bed?"

"Oh, right," he said, looking at his watch. "He'll be sleeping for the next eight hours."

"Don't you think you ought to look in on the Waiting Room?"

"Waiting Room," Al repeated warily. "Why?"

Darcie could read the signs of his uneasiness, but went on. "Usually, it's the first thing you hit when Sam lands."

"Well," Al hedged. "You've already talked to him."

"Yes," Darcie said. "He's actually a very pleasant man." She smiled, knowing she had an inescapable argument. "If you don't really believe he's a vampire, what's the harm in it?"

As if knowing she had him, Al sighed heavily, turning to the door. "Okay, you win. After I check with Ziggy, I'll talk to him. But," he warned, turning back to level his finger at her, "first time he bares his fangs, I'm *outta* there!"

* * *

Sam woke to the alarm, instantly aware of where he was. He vaguely remembered dreams, but he put them out of mind, sure that it was Natalie's suggestion that Nick might be a vampire that made him dream of drinking... Shaking his head, he got out of the satin covered bed, pulled on a pair of sweat pants and walked into the adjoining bathroom. He hated working the night shift and the hung over tiredness it always left him with the next night. He was also hungry, but the thought of food left him faintly nauseated. Maybe Nick was coming down with some kind of flu.

Looking in the mirror, he thoughtfully regarded his reflection as he brushed his teeth. He saw only a blond man in his early thirties, whose teeth didn't seem that much different from his own. As he flossed, he looked closer, feeling the canines. Certainly, there were no fangs and if he were really a vampire, then why did he see himself in the mirror? Maybe last night he'd just gotten a little carried away. Vampires and holograms cast no reflections, right? So he...

"Checking for fangs?" Al's voice startled him and for a brief flash of a moment he thought the blue eyes turned yellow before reverting to the cool blue. He turned around so swiftly that the hologram fell back a step. "Whoa, pal," he said hastily, "it's just me."

Sam took a calming breath and let it out when he saw his friend. "I really wish you wouldn't do that." He turned back to the sink and slowly put the toothbrush in its holder. Turning on the water, he splashed his face, then dried it with a towel.

Putting the towel on its rod, he turned back to the brightly dressed hologram whose gaze was directed at the mirror. Sam turned and looked, seeing only his reflection, but not Al's. The eyes staring back at him were blue, he thought firmly. He sensed Al watching him.

"What is it?" Sam asked, turning to the hologram.

"You have a reflection," Al said, as if that explain everything, gesturing with his cigar at the mirror.

"Yes, I do and you don't," Sam said patiently.

"But...you're a..." The Observer shrugged diffidently, shooting him a wary glance, "**Darcie** says..."

"Says I'm a vampire?" Sam supplied, suddenly finding the whole situation amusing. He could imagine what Al's reaction had been when he had found out that there was a self-professed vampire in the Waiting Room.

"But..." Al was obviously at a loss for words. "You're sure taking this calmly for someone who insists

that there is no such thing as a vampires."
"There are no vampires," Sam said firmly. "But..." his resolve failed him as he remembered his terrible, overwhelming need for the red fluid in the wine bottles only a few short hours ago, and his dismaying inability to keep down even such a simple meal as a hamburger and fries.
"But?" Al prodded uneasily, looking as if he were ready to run at the slightest movement Sam may make.
"But," tossing the hand towel down, Sam left the mirror and Nick's reflection for the relative safety of the bedroom, "I think Nick ***thinks*** he is a vampire."
"Thinks he is." Al nodded in relieved satisfaction. "That's what I told Darcie, that he ***thinks*** he is...but there's no way he could be." A bit anxiously, he circled Sam to get a look at his face, "Is there?"
"Of course not," Sam snapped, but found he avoided his friend's eyes all the same.
"Of course not," Al repeated, watching Sam who had begun to pace restlessly. "So, why are you," he indicated the physicist's restless movement with an uneasy wave of his cigar, "prowling around like that?"
Still avoiding the hologram's gaze, Sam walked over to pull a dark t-shirt from Nick's dresser. "It's just that," he hesitated under the guise of taking time to pull on the shirt, "the suggestion is pretty strong. I'm," he shot a quick look at the Observer to gauge his reaction, "feeling some of his urges. I think I'm experiencing some synergy this leap."
"Urges?" The hologram's eyes narrowed warily. "What ***kind*** of urges?"
"Well...I..."
"Yeah?"
"Doesn't matter," Sam shrugged uneasily. "But I think Nick hasn't been eating solid food lately and it's going to take me a while to get his body used to it."
Al looked a little green. "So, what's he been eating?" he asked as if he didn't really want to know but couldn't help asking all the same.
Deciding to avoid the question, Sam said only, "I tried eating some fast food last night that Natalie brought over, but it didn't stay down long."
"Fast food?" Al said, grimacing as only a self professed gourmet could. "No wonder you couldn't keep it down. Now, a good manicotti or spaghetti... Natalie?" Al interrupted himself, catching the reference to one of Nick's friends. "You mean Natalie Lambert?"
"Yes," Sam sat down on the edge of Nick's bed, "has Nick mentioned her?"
"Yeah, he's worried about her. So are we."
"Worried? Why?"

Tucking his hands in his pockets, the hologram regarded him thoughtfully. "In the first history, she died sometime in the next three days."

"Died? How?"

"That's the sick thing," Al said with a suppressed shudder, "her body was drained of blood. You don't think Nick...in some kind of blood lust..."

"No," Sam said sharply, getting to his feet.

"Okay, okay," Al said soothingly, falling back a step all the same. "It's just that you said..."

"No," Sam said more calmly, more shaken than he cared to admit at Al's suggestion. "I mean, even if Nick had killed her by drinking her blood, I wouldn't." *I wouldn't,* he told himself, no matter what the synergy. "My leaping in would have changed history," he said, forcing himself to sound confident, "and since Ziggy says she dies, that can't be the case. Someone else must kill her."

"Yeah," Al nodded, "you might be right. Besides," he shrugged, moving aside as Sam began to pace again, "I met Nick and he seems a pretty decent guy--for someone who thinks he's a vampire, that is."

"What happened to Nick after Natalie died?"

Al pulled the handlink from his pocket and consulted it. "Looks like he took it hard. He blamed himself for not stopping it and quit the force. He disappeared and Ziggy can't find any trace of him since. I think he and Natalie may have a thing going."

"Why do you say that?"

The hologram shot him a glance, "I can tell. Al Calavicci knows these things."

Sam snorted, "Al Calavicci projects his own thoughts onto every other male and can't fathom the fact a man and a woman might be just close friends."

"Huh, unh," the Observer shook his head. "He's got it bad, even if he doesn't know it yet. But he does, he..."

"Al," Sam interrupted, "she's a doctor. I think she's working with Nick to...

"She's a medical examiner," Al qualified, "though I guess a vampire would need a doctor that specializes in dead patients. She..."

Shooting the hologram a glare that silenced him, Sam said firmly, "I think she's trying to help Nick overcome this obsession with being a vampire."

"Nick thinks," Al shot back dryly, "that she's trying to cure him of vampirism."

"Same thing." At Al's skeptical glance, Sam shrugged, "In a way. She told me last night that she thinks if I..."

"If ***Nick***," the hologram corrected firmly.

"Okay, if Nick stops drinking the blood..."

"He drinks blood? Real blood? Ah, Sam..."

"Bovine blood," Sam said, raising his voice to override Al's protests. "If he stops drinking the cow blood, and starts to eat, he'll 'come over'. A cure is a cure is a cure."

"And if it works, it works, it works," the hologram quipped before saying a bit queasily, "You're not going to do that cow blood stuff, are you Sam? That's not what you meant by urges..."

"I'm not going to drink any blood," Sam said in a round about answer. "But, you might put Ziggy on the cure angle."

"What?"

"The cure," Sam said a bit impatiently. "Maybe that's why I'm here, to help Nick find his cure."

"You're *here*," Al said, "to keep Natalie Lambert from being killed. Ziggy lays odds at that at 78 percent."

"And Ziggy's changed her mind before," Sam said. "If Nick has this big of a problem with vampirism, maybe we're here to give him a cure."

"But, Sam, you said..."

"A cure he can believe in," Sam said patiently, "one that's a bit more active than changes in his diet."

"Oh," Al said, as if suddenly understanding, "okay. He's been talking about this search of his for a cure." He regarded Sam closely, "You know, he says he's almost 800 years old."

"Al..."

"Okay, I know. The cure. He thought he had one once, a set of special cups, but LaCroix destroyed one of them."

"LaCroix?"

"The vampire who Nick says made him a vampire. He didn't want Nick to be mortal again. Once," Al settled into his storytelling mode, "Nick found a book that supposedly had a recipe for a cure but LaCroix burned it. He..."

"Is this LaCroix real?" Sam interrupted, frowning thoughtfully.

Al hesitated, "Nick says he is..." he corrected himself hastily, "was."

"Was?"

"Yeah, Nick says he destroyed him. Why?"

Sam shook his head. "I was just thinking, if there was someone else sick enough to think they were a vampire, maybe they killed Natalie. It'd be a terrible way to take revenge on Nick."

Al looked dubious. "Yeah, well Nick says he's dead, but there's Jeannette."

"Jeannette?" Sam cast a sharp glance at Al, remembering how the wine glass she had offered him had first been hers. "What about her?"

"Nick says she's... She *thinks* she's a vampire too. But she..." Al swallowed hard, "doesn't drink from live human's any more. She gets her blood from blood banks. She thinks it's too dangerous for vampires to leave victims lying around. Nick's almost positive that she wouldn't harm Natalie, that she knows how much Natalie means to him."

He stopped and looked at Sam. "But maybe that's why she killed her. Maybe she was jealous. You never know about women. Jealously was what lead to my fourth, or was it, fifth divorce?" He furrowed his brow as though trying to remember. He nodded. "It was my fourth, Sharon. Just because I was paying a little attention to my aide..."

Sam stared at him and shook his head. Al never failed to amaze him. "We were talking about Natalie?" he prompted. "Oh, right. Nick says that he has no idea which 'vampire' might want to kill Natalie, but somehow he thinks it's connected with her search to help him become human...I mean *think* he's becoming human," Al said, carefully. "By the way, did I say that LaCroix didn't like the idea of Nick trying to become human?"

"Is Nick sure this LaCroix is dead?" Sam asked, not liking the sound of the man's name. It sounded sinister, somehow.

Al nodded. "But then, Nick also said he thought he destroyed him once before and LaCroix showed up, alive. Or," the hologram shot a glance at Sam, who was listening intently, "should I say undead?"

Shaking his head in disgust, Sam headed for Nick's closet to look for something other than sweats to wear. "That's not funny, Al. These people have real problems if they believe this stuff. Does Ziggy have any more information on Natalie's death?"

The hologram checked his link again, "Her body was found shortly before dawn two days from now and the time of death was sometime between one and two o'clock in the morning. Nick was really worried when I told him about her. Almost frantic. I'm telling you, the Medical Examiner means a little more to him than he's admitting."

"So," Sam said with a sigh, "I have two days to find the killer and stop him or her."

"Nights, anyway," Al corrected, looking at the alarm clock. "Nick never, ever goes out in the day, and there's three more hours until sundown."

"Al, that's just his phobia talking," Sam said, pulling out a gray shirt and a pair of black slacks to

wear. "I'm hungry, I think I'm going to go shopping."

"Uh, Sam, I don't know if I would do that if I were you," Al warned. "What if Nick really is a vampire? You might go up in smoke."

Sam shook his head. "You've been watching too many Bela Lugosi movies. Nick might have a slight sensitivity to light. There is a disease called porphyria. People who suffer from it can't tolerate light and they have anemia. Maybe he has a delusion that he's a vampire and that's why he drinks blood. I don't know, but I do know there's no such thing as a vampire." He walked down the stairs and grabbed the leather jacket from the chair, heading for the freight elevator.

"Sam," Al said, his voice rising in concern. "I really wish you wouldn't go outside just yet."

Sam opened the door and got onto the elevator with Al following. Punching the button for the basement entrance, Sam said, "You really believe he's a vampire, don't you?"

Al hesitated, pressing his lips in indecision before nodding. "Yeah, I do," he said in a rush. "And before you laugh at me, let me finish. I talked with the man. He's not your normal leapee, he's as lucid as you or me. Darcie's done psych tests on him. He comes up more well adjusted than most people. And his memories...Sam, he talks of the past like he's lived it. He talks about the 15th century like it was yesterday, stuff that you couldn't learn in history books. And his knowledge of archaeology rivals yours. You'd love talking with him."

"Just because he's studied archeology doesn't mean..."

"He's not only studied archeology, Sam. He's taught it at University in Chicago in the 1950's. Ziggy came up with a picture from some McCarthy trials, where Nicholas Girard was on trial for communism. It's him, Sam, even Ziggy agrees. He doesn't look a day younger than you do right now."

"Maybe, it's a relative, a father or older brother."

"It's not a relative, trust me on this one."

Opening the door to the outside, Sam shook his head and stepped outside, his stubbornness refusing to allow him to believe that the hologram could be right. That would mean...he was a vampire!

The ray of late afternoon sunlight hit him like a burning inferno. He felt the heat a second before the light hit his sensitive eyes. He brought his arm up instinctively the same instant that he closed his eyes, and got a brief glimpse of smoke coming from his hand. Everywhere the sunlight hit his skin, agony burned his nerves. The smell of scorched flesh penetrated his

senses.

"Sam!" He could hear the Observer's voice raised in horror. "Get inside, ***now***!"

Obeying the insistent demand, Sam fumbled for the door, literally blinded by the light. Grabbing the handle, he actually tore the door off its hinges in his panic to reach the darkness promised inside. Throwing it to the ground, he stumbled inside, not stopping until he reached the elevator and closed the door. He could barely see now. Smoke still rose from his jacket and he yanked it off and threw it down. Taking a deep breath, he collapsed against the wall of the elevator, sliding to the floor.

"Are you all right, Sam?" Al asked, his voice still shaky. "Your eyes look funny and you're still smoking."

The burning agony was gone, he felt like he had a very bad sunburn, but the physical effects were the least of his concerns. ***This was no skin disease! This was no delusion!*** He could feel the jerkiness of his movement as he nodded his head. "I think so," he said, his voice hoarse. ***I'm as well as could be expected, for a man who has just had his beliefs in a sane and logical world shattered.***

"Sam, the way you ripped off that door...it must have weighed 200 pounds."

Sam nodded, finally accepting what his senses had been trying to tell him since he had leaped in. "I don't think I'll be going outside anytime before dark," he said with a desperate sort of irony. He looked up at the concerned face of the hologram. "I'm a vampire, Al."

* * *

Darcie was waiting for Al when he came out of the Imaging Chamber. He looked tired and...distressed somehow.

"What's wrong, Al?" she asked. "Is Sam okay?"

"For someone who was almost burned to a crisp, I guess so."

"What?" she asked, shocked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Mr. Skeptic Beckett wouldn't believe that he was a vampire and went outside at four o'clock in the afternoon to prove it. He almost went up in a puff of smoke. He tore the door off its hinges to get back inside."

"Dr. Beckett did that?" ***So Nick was right, he was a vampire, or at least Sam was.***

"What are you still doing up?" Al asked, looking at his watch, then rubbing his chin. "It's nearly five a.m. Boy, these time changes are murder. It's three in

the afternoon there," he said, pointing at the Imaging Chamber. "I've got to get some sleep."

Not knowing if it was the right moment to bring up her request, but considering the time restrictions they were working under, she decided to take the direct route. "I'd like to take Nick outside the building."

Al's eyes narrowed, all signs of tiredness gone. "What? Do you remember what happened the last time a leapee got out of the building?" He reached up and rubbed his chest as if in memory of the gunshot he sustained when Stiles escaped and the Project Observer had to track him down.

"I remember, but that was a murderer."

"And Nick's a ***vampire***. Even Sam believes it, now." The admiral considered her closely. "You said Nick doesn't bite necks any more. Has he ever? Somehow, I don't think they had blood banks during the Middle Ages."

"You've talked to him," she said, dodging the question, "do ***you*** think he's dangerous?" When Al didn't reply, she continued, "I feel I can trust him, and I can take a guard with me, if that would make you feel better."

"Why do you want to take him outside? Especially after what happened to Sam. What if he goes up in smoke?"

"Al, I've tested Nick. I've checked his blood, his reaction to light, everything. He's as human as you or I. Can you imagine how you would feel if you hadn't seen a sunrise in 800 years, and now you had the ability to go out in the daylight?" She caught his arm, holding his gaze with hers. "I really want to do this, Al. I'll be careful. I'll take the responsibility."

Al shook his head. "No, I will. I always do." He smiled wryly. "I don't know why I let beautiful women talk me into doing things. I guess it's my fatal flaw."

"You could make an appointment with Verbena when she gets back, if you want to talk about it," Darcie said, smiling.

"No, thanks." Al shook his head. "I've had enough of shrinks to last a life time. Thanks, anyway. You just be careful."

"Why don't you come out with us?"

"I don't think so. Being around him kinda gives me the creeps. I keep on wanting to hold my neck."

"Someday you are going to have to deal with your aversion to the supernatural," Darcie teased.

"Not today. I'm going to go check with Ziggy and see if she has any more information. Sam wants me to ask her about a cure for vampirism. At first, he wanted just to pacify Nick's delusion of being a vampire, but

now, he wants to really make him mortal."

He shook his head incredulously as if unable to believe what he had just said and continued, "Maybe she can unearth another copy of that book Nick was talking about. And then..." Al yawned mightily as if it overtook him unawares, "while she's working on that, maybe I'll even catch a few winks."

* * *

Nick had had his fill of sleep even if it had been more restful than usual. There wasn't much to do in the all white room. He was sitting cross- legged on the bed reading Anne Rice's ***Interview with a Vampire*** when Darcie came in. He looked up and smiled. Putting in a bookmark to save his place, he closed the book.

"Doing some research?" she asked, nodding at the paperback.

He laughed and shook his head. "Pure fiction, although Lestat could easily be based on LaCroix."

"If LaCroix reminds you of Lestat," she asked with a grin, "who does Louis remind you of?"

He grinned back, then sobered, "I know what you're thinking and I admit there are similarities, but there is no way I could bring a child over," he said, thinking of the young ruffian boy that LaCroix had changed into one of the Children of the Night. A child, forever lost in his youth.

"I didn't think you would," she said easily, tucking her hands into her lab coat pockets as she regarded him. "I'm surprised you haven't read it yet."

"I'm not really into pulp novels," he said, closing the book and slipping from the bed to stand facing her. "I did read Stoker's ***Dracula,*** but I'm afraid that's it when it comes to vampire books." Absently, he gestured with the book in his hand, "I must say Rice has a unique way of writing from the perspective of the vampire. She has Lestat's viciousness down to a T."

"Before you judge Lestat you ought to read the next in the series," Darcie said, taking the offered book and placing it down on the bed. "It's from his viewpoint. Then, in the fourth book, ***Tale of the Body Thief,*** Lestat switches bodies with a mortal."

"Switches bodies," Nick repeated, interested. "How?"

"The human told him that he would switch bodies with him for a short period of time if Lestat would give him a large amount of money. After he proved he could do it, Lestat agreed. They were supposed to meet to switch back, but the human decided he liked being immortal and took the money and ran." The physician shot him a

teasing grin, "By the way, Lestat decided he didn't like being human and finally got his vampire body back."

Nick shook his head. "I can't understand it. If I had a chance to be mortal..."

"What would you do?" she asked softly, as if she truly wanted to know.

"See a sunrise. Swim in the ocean. Make love to a woman without wanting to drink her blood." He grinned a bit wistfully, "Eat without getting sick to my stomach. Drink a good wine, coffee, anything other than blood."

Holding out her hand, she said quietly, "I can't give you the ocean, but I have a surprise for you."

"What?"

"Come and see."

Intrigued, he accepted her offered hand and allowed her to lead him out of the room, down a series of corridors and into an elevator. It went up for what seemed a very long time before stopping. "Where are we going?" he asked finally, taking hold of her arm to pull her back as she started forward when the elevator doors slid open.

"Outside," she answered, meeting his eyes evenly, "to watch the sunrise. But, you have to promise not to run. I told Al I trusted you. I know if you give me your word, you'll keep it."

Nick regarded her thoughtfully, wondering what it was that she saw in him that made her trust him. Slowly, he nodded. "I won't run, but..." He turned to gaze in the direction she had directed him. "To go outside," he hesitated, "in the sunlight. What if," his eyes came back to hers, "what if I'm still in my own body?"

"Then we'll come right back in," she answered calmly. "If I know you as I think I do, you can't *not* take this chance."

Nick thought of the long years of darkness he had longed for this opportunity; the parade of endless nights, yearning for the sun. Could he really let it pass him by? When he had to go back to the darkness, would he not always wonder if it could have been possible to take this chance, and mourn its loss?

Slowly, he nodded. "Where's the door?"

She smiled in understanding and answered gently, "This way." Leading him to a desk, she asked the guard to unlock the door.

As it opened before him, Nick felt an instinctive urge to run from the near dawn light that flooded inward to meet him. Usually at this time, he would be heading home to his safe, dark loft. The feeling nearly overpowered him, sending him fleeing back into the

underground safety of the place he had left.

"Don't worry," Darcie said soothingly, "we won't go far. If you feel any pain, we'll go back in. The corporal there," she nodded at the guard, "will hold the door."

Nick grinned crookedly, wondering what the guard thought of a man that was afraid to go outside. Probably, he thought he was out of his mind. ***No, not his mind, just his body.*** He took a step forward, then another. Outside. And it was nearly day.

"Over here," Darcie said, pointing to a bench recessed in one of the walls of the partially enclosed courtyard. "I often come here in the morning and late evening when it's cool. Have a seat."

He sat down and she sat next to him. The sky was getting lighter, the dark blue turning to paler blue. He forced the panic down and as though sensing it, the physician's hand slipped into his own.

"It's okay," she said softly.

A sliver of bright orange rose above the horizon, sending a brilliant ray of light over Nick's body. He flinched, expecting burning agony, but felt only a pleasant warmth.

The sun, becoming yellow as it rose, turned the surrounding clouds striking shades of reds, oranges and yellows in the blue background of the sky. "It's beautiful," Nick breathed softly, nearly forgetting the presence of the woman beside him. The warmth of the sun on his skin was an experience he never thought he would feel again.

"There's no pain?"

"No," Nick breathed, raising his face to the sun. "I feel wonderful." It was true. He felt free. He felt alive. He felt...mortal.

"Good," Darcie said, squeezing his hand.

Nick took his eyes from the sky to look at her. "Darcie, I don't know how to thank you. You can't know how much this means to me."

"Your joy is thanks enough. I'm just glad I'm able to share it with you. Now about those other things you'd like to experience..."

For a brief moment, Nick thought she was talking about love and searched her face intently. She was a beautiful woman and it wouldn't be difficult to love her. Breaking the moment, his stomach growled loudly in the silence of the early morning. Mortality, indeed. A human body did have its priorities, after all.

He grinned, and they laughed together. It was wonderful, sitting in the sun, laughing with a beautiful woman in a body that knew all the mixed pleasures of a mortal existence.

"You know, I think I'm hungry," Nick admitted, wryly. He felt a wondering surprise at the sensation that he had not experienced for so long. This need was so different than the hunger he felt for the past 800 years that he wanted to sing from the very wonderful mundaneness of it.

"How does bacon and eggs sound?" Darcie suggested with a smile.

Nick grinned back, "Heavenly."

* * *

Al found Nick and Darcie in the Waiting Room. The detective was drinking his second cup of coffee, finishing off a plate of scrambled eggs and starting on his toast. Tucking one hand into his pocket, the Observer watched in amusement. "I don't think I've ever seen any one enjoy cafeteria food so much." He grinned, "Except, maybe Sam, who has no appreciation of gourmet dining at all."

"This is fantastic!" Nick exclaimed, his attention still on his plate. "I had forgotten how good eggs were."

"If you think those are good, wait until you taste some real Italian food," Al said with a grin. "There's a place in town that makes spaghetti and meatballs that is out of this world. Maybe I can get some sent in for supper."

"Sounds great," Nick said, washing down the last of the toast with his coffee.

"I thought *you* were going to bed," Darcie said, smiling at Al.

"I was, but Ziggy came up with that book Nick mentioned."

The detective looked up, startled. "You mean the Aberrat? There was another copy?"

Al nodded, waving a piece of paper. "It was found in 1996 and we were able to get the museum in Berlin to fax us a copy of the page that has the cure for vampirism. Boy, I sure had to come up with a good story why we needed it." He shrugged elaborately. "I couldn't very well say, 'Oh, I have a vampire in my Waiting Room I want to cure.'"

"May I see it?" Nick asked, leaning forward excitedly.

"Sure," the admiral said, handing him the paper. "Ziggy says it's not a very complicated formula, but there's just one problem."

"What?" Darcie asked as Nick quickly scanned the page.

Al pointed at the third ingredient from the top.

"This. It's a very rare root that was indigenous to a certain area of a rain forest in South America."
"Was?" the detective asked.
"Right, was. The area was cleared in 1991. It doesn't exist in the present day. Either yours or ours."
It hurt Al to watch the light leave Nick's eyes. For a long moment, there was silence, then the detective's head came up hopefully. "Wait," he said, "maybe there's still a chance. I know a woman, a voodoo woman actually. If anyone would have the root, she would."
"It's worth a shot," Al said, his own mood lifting at the hope in Nick's voice. ***A voodoo witch! Wait until he told Sam.*** "What's her name and how does Sam contact her?"
Nick gave Al the information, and Al punched it into the handlink, almost gleefully.
"What's so funny?" Nick asked.
"Oh, nothing, really," Al said, struggling to keep a straight face. "You'd have to understand Sam. Here's a scientist that doesn't believe anything except what his eyes tell him, who refuses to believe in things that go bump in the night. And now in the space of a couple of days, not only has he admitted to the presence of vampires, now I get to tell him he's going to visit a real live voodoo witch. You don't happen to know a few werewolves?"
At the look on Nick's face, Al's glee sobered to wariness. "Unh, never mind," he said hastily, holding up a hand to forestall his answer. "Forget it, I don't want to know."
Nick shook his head, his mood obviously not mirroring the Observer's as Darcie chided gently, "Al..."
"Listen, Al," the detective said, "She's not exactly a witch and I wouldn't call her that to her face."
"Right," Al agreed, slightly chagrined. "I'll warn Sam."
Nick leaned forward to hold the admiral's gaze, "I want you to tell Sam to stay away from the Raven. It's dangerous for him there with the temptation of the blood, and the other vampires." He shrugged uneasily, "I'm not sure that they would sense that Sam isn't me, but there's no reason to chance it. If Jeannette discovered that, there's no telling what she would do."
"I'll tell him," Al assured him solemnly, though the slightest hint of merriment still danced in his eyes as he turned to go. "You've got my word on that, I'll tell him."

* * *

Sam rubbed his freshly shaven chin. There, that was better. He never did like having a day's growth of beard. Looking in the mirror, he marveled that clean shaven, Nick looked younger than the thirty-five years that his driver's license claimed. Maybe the reason the vampire went unshaven was to make people believe he was older than the 25 years old he looked. If only they knew the truth.

800 years! Sam wondered what it would be like to have lived that long, to live through the centuries, to see history in the making. He had looked through some of Nick's possessions and had seen them for what they were. Museum quality pieces of antiquities spanning over the centuries dating back to the 13th century! Shaking his head at the incomprehensibility of it, he turned to leave the bathroom.

Unexpectedly, he was hit by a sudden wave of dizziness. He caught the edge of the door to steady himself, fighting the weakness that threatened to bring him to his knees.

It was the hunger, he knew. He thought of the bottles in the refrigerator with a mixture of revulsion and attraction, desire growing simply at the image.

Natalie believed that if he simply didn't drink the blood and ate solid food, that Nick could revert back to being human. But, Sam didn't think she had any concept of the sheer, raw power of this hunger. It went beyond any desire--beyond any lust he had ever known.

He had tried to eat solid food, he really had. But, the hamburger she had left hadn't stayed down for more than a few minutes. How could any being, mortal or not, survive without some sort of nourishment to support it? It seemed futile. But, he ***had*** promised her he would try.

Steadying himself a moment in the doorway, he gathered the strength to make his way down the stairs to the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator, he took out two bottles, his hands trembling slightly. On the surface, they looked like any other wine bottles...but his new senses told him differently. Instinctively, he knew, without a doubt, that the contents would bring the strength back into his weak limbs. He ***needed*** it far more than he ***wanted*** it...and he wanted it very, very badly.

Setting one of the bottles on the counter, he opened the other one and poured it down the drain by sheer force of will. The red puddle spread in the sink, its aromatic lure making his hands tremble with a need that



was a physical ache. ***He would not succumb!*** Taking a deep breath to calm himself was a mistake as the blood smell hit him like a hammer and he recoiled from the sink lest he give into the need. How did Nick ***stand*** it?

The cork in the second bottle was stubborn and slippery, resisting his attempts to pull it free. Finally in frustration, he brought it up to his mouth to use his teeth to remove it. As the cork finally slipped free, the liquid in the bottle splashed upward, falling in a fine spray on his lips and tongue. Again, the overwhelming hunger hit him, stronger now, and an exquisitely sharp pain shot through his canines.

Feeling control slipping from him, he tried to fight the hunger, but it was overwhelming. He *needed* that blood. His jaws and eyes closed in a primal reflex and the need crested into something nearly uncontrollable. He had to feed ***now***.

Close to panic, he tried spitting the cork out, but found, to his horror, that it was caught on his tooth. Appalled by the sensations that washed over him, he reached up to forcibly jerk it free. Falling back a step, he lifted the object to regard it and saw a jagged tear in the soft material. ***What was happening to him?***

He brought his hand slowly up to his mouth and felt the sharpened canine. No. This could *not* be real! Staggering over to the mirror on the wall, he stared in fascinated horror at his reflection. It wasn't the long sharp teeth that caught his attention--not at first. It was the yellow eyes glowing with a kind of unholy hunger that glared back at him from a stranger's face. A stranger that was in a very real way, himself.

Backing away, he retreated to the kitchen, the blood drawing him like a magnet. He was trapped in some sort of waking nightmare! Mesmerized, he stared at the remaining bottle, waiting near the edge of the counter where he had left it. He was so very, very hungry. As if it were another's hand performing the act, he lifted it, his head going back in anticipation of the liquid in his mouth.

"Sam!" Al's shocked yell coming from directly behind him startled him from his trance. "Aw, yuck! Sam, don't!"

Hastily righting the bottle, Sam felt rage, hot and consuming, fill him. How ***dare*** the human interrupt him when...

Suddenly ashamed, his back still to the hologram, he slowly lowered the bottle to the counter. What the hell had he been thinking, anyway? With the flood of returning reason, he withdrew his hand from the temptation and grasped the counter edge tightly, trying

to fight down the violent emotions within him. This could not be! Sickened, he closed his eyes as the memory of his own altered reflection seared him. It could not be--yet it was.

When he could trust himself to speak, he asked, "So, what did you find out?" Even to his ears, his voice was low and raspy. He tried to push down the beast clamoring to be set free.

"Well, I..." the hologram faltered to a stop, edging closer and peering over Sam's shoulder to get a look at his face. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." Reluctantly, Sam half turned to meet his friend's eyes. When there was no reaction other than a wary, watchful regard from the hologram, Sam finished the turn to face him completely. "Yes," he said more convincingly, "I'm fine." Whatever the physical changes had been, they had faded.

"You're sure?" Al asked suspiciously. "Looked to me like you were ready to chug a lug that..." He let the sentence trail off and gestured uneasily at the blood.

Sam felt a brief resurgence of his earlier anger. "Let it go, okay?" It was not a request.

"Okay," the other man agreed unwillingly. He cast another glance at the bottle and gave a theatrical shudder. "I mean, you could at least use a glass if you gotta..."

"Al!"

"Okay, okay," the other man said hastily. "Ziggy came up with the formula from that old book." He pulled the hand link from his pocket. "You have something to write this down? I'll read it off to you."

"Sure." A searching of the kitchen drawer turned up a note pad and pen. Sam quickly wrote down the formula as Al dictated. When they had reached the end, he regarded it in satisfaction, all his earlier anger gone. "This is great, Al! Maybe Natalie can help me make this up in her lab."

"Ah, well," Al hedged, "before you get your hopes up, there's one catch."

"What?" The physicist shot him a skeptical glance. "I have to be stabbed through the heart after I drink the stuff?"

"No," Al said, disgustedly. "One of the ingredient comes from a root that only grows in a certain area of the Amazon jungle. Unfortunately, that area was bulldozed in 1991."

"What? You mean, there's no way to make the cure?"

"I didn't say that," Al returned patiently. "Nick thinks one of his friends might have some of the root."

"Let me guess. One of his vampire friends."

"Nope," Al said dryly, "one of his *voodoo* friends."
Sam sighed in weary exasperation. "Now, why doesn't that surprise me? First vampires, then voodoo. What will it be next, werewolves?"
"Now, Sam, don't let this get you down," the hologram said with a glint of amusement in his eyes, "Why don't you just admit it's driving you nuts because you said there weren't any vampires, then you end up leaping into one."
"Okay, just get it over with," Sam sighed, resignedly.
"What?" Al asked, eyes widening in overdone innocence.
"I know you're dying to say 'I told you so,' so just get it over with."
"Now, Sam, would I do that?" The innocent look on Al's face could have rivaled an angel's, but Sam wasn't fooled.
"Yes, you would," he said wryly, "with the utmost pleasure. I wouldn't want to deprive you."
"I told you there were vampires," Al said obediently. "And..." he added with evident satisfaction, "there are probably werewolves, too."
Grinning good naturedly, Sam shook his head. "I don't doubt it. So, where do I find this voodoo person?"
"Her name is Maria Perez. Nick says she lives on the west side of town." Taking the handlink out of his pocket, he pushed a button and read off the address. "Take the Caddy. You might as well get there in style." He paused a moment, then said as if in all seriousness, "Or you could always fly."
"Fly?" Sam asked, shocked. "As in a bat?"
"No," Al shook his head. "Nick says vampires don't turn into bats or wolves or any other animals. But they do have the power to fly. You ought to try it, who knows, it might be fun."
"What?!"
"Yeah," Al urged, eyes lighting as he obviously warmed to the idea, "zipping along with the wind in your face. Just you and the stars and..."
"And a thousand feet of empty space below me," Sam interrupted, feeling a surge of nausea. "No, thanks. My feet are going to stay planted firmly on the ground."
"Aw, Sam," the hologram protested. "Where's your sense of adventure? If you're gonna be a vampire, you ought to at least get some fun out of it!" At the look he received, he let the subject drop with a sigh. "Okay, okay, so when do you have to be at work tonight?"
"I don't," Sam said as he walked over to the closet, grabbed a long black leather overcoat and pulled it on.

"Nick has a couple nights off. I told Natalie that I would drop by later. I've got to talk this formula over with her."

"Well, okay," the hologram agreed hesitantly. "But, stay away from the Raven."

At the Observer's tone, Sam turned to find Al regarding him with a new seriousness in his eyes. "Why?"

"Nick is afraid that Jeannette might sense you're not him and get suspicious." The hologram drew near, shaking the handlink teasingly at him though there was a shadow of worry in his dark eyes. "And you don't want a vampire upset with you, now do you? Especially, when you're trying to become human?"

Sam thought of his reflection in the mirror, of the fangs, and the eyes glowing yellow with bloodlust. What would it be like if that face had been transposed over Jeannette's and she were coming after him? No, he agreed silently, he definitely did not want to see what an upset vampire would look like.

"Don't worry, Al," he assured the hologram quietly. "I can't think of any reason I would want to go near the Raven."

* * *

Exercising in the Project's gym, Nick was surprised at the weakness of the body he inhabited. Just lifting weights had him breathing hard and sweating. Wiping his forehead, he was surprised to see clear fluid. He had half expected blood. Mortality was amazing. On one hand, it was wonderful, But, on the other, this body seemed terribly fragile and vulnerable.

He wondered how long he would last as a police officer while a human. Half of the wounds that he had experienced would have killed a mortal. A sudden realization of what he was thinking stopped him cold. ***You're thinking like you're going to remain this way,*** Nick thought. ***If Sam saves Natalie, he'll leap out of your body and you'll be back into your vampire body. Unless,*** Nick countered his own argument, ***he comes up with a cure.***

"You're going great," Darcie said, watching him from a nearby bench. "We ask our leapees to exercise if they are at all able to."

"It's been a long time since I've had to exercise to keep in shape," he said, trying to catch his breath.

"Actually, Sam is in pretty good shape. Your problem is that you're trying to do too much. You're used to being inhumanly strong, and being just human seems weak to you."

"Can we go back outside?" Nick asked, while he worked his biceps, hoping he didn't sound like a child asking for a favor.

"I think I can manage that," the physician agreed. "I'll see about packing a picnic lunch."

"Sounds delicious," Nick said, stopping to rub his stomach with a grin. "All this exercise is making me hungry. I'm going to have to be careful of what I eat, or I'll gain ten pounds...or should I say, Sam will gain ten pounds."

She laughed. "Don't worry about it. I'll just make you do a couple miles on our stationary bike."

"Anything but that," Nick said in mock horror, returning to the weight machine.

"Why don't I let you finish here," Darcie said, getting up. "I'll check with the chef and see if I can get some food. Do you have any favorites?"

"Anything you choose. I promise you, I'll love it," he said. "After I finish here, I'll be hungry enough to eat a horse."

Darcie laughed, "I don't think we have any horses around, but I'll make sure you're well fed."

She left and Nick turned back to the machine. He spent the next fifteen minutes going through the different exercises, enjoying the feeling of worked muscles. Thirsty, he stopped and got a cup full of water from the large bottle near the entrance to the gym. It tasted like nectar going down.

With a towel around his neck, he made his way back to his room, with his ever present guard as his escort. They still didn't trust him, but when he thought about it, he decided that he wouldn't trust himself if he were them. They needed him there. If he left, then Sam wouldn't have a body to come back to.

Entering his room, he stripped off his sweaty clothes and stepped into the shower. The hot water beat against his body, relaxing taunt, overworked muscles. Washing himself, he let his mind wander over the years, over the centuries, the mortal women he had known and wanted to love, if only his condition had not prevented him. ***Sevyn, the beautiful ballerina who danced like an angel; Alyce, the archaeologist who wanted to live forever through the centuries;and Natalie...*** It was perhaps the first time he admitted the truth to himself. He had denied the growing relationship between himself and the pathologist, but it was there. If only he could love a woman without wanting to take her blood. If only he could become human. ***But, then,*** the thought came unbidden, ***I'm human now.***

Close upon the realization came thoughts of Darcie. She was beautiful, she was a woman, and he was attracted

to her. This body's response told him that. But would she be attracted to him? How could she be attracted to a man who had killed so many people--a man who at the moment was residing in the body of her boss? And what of Dr. Beckett? Would it be fair to use Sam's body for his own desire?

But, if Sam was using his body, why shouldn't he use Sam's? He had done worse things over the centuries, much worse. This seemed a far lesser transgression--one hardly to be noticed--against the blackness of his past. Why not experience mortal life to its fullest?

Because it's wrong, the small voice of conscience said firmly within his mind. ***It's wrong and you say you're done with darkness.*** Resolutely, he turned his mind from the temptations and turned the water into a cold blast, as if the water could wash away all of his desires, all of the corruption of the years. He ***was*** done with darkness--forever if Sam were successful. It would do no good to dwell on it.

When he emerged from the shower, he picked up the dark shirt and pants Darcie had left him, feeling grateful that he could be rid of the all-white stretch suit he had been wearing. Lingering in the shower had taken him longer than he realized, Darcie should be returning soon. He dressed quickly, and was pulling the shirt on when the buzzer sounded on the door.

"Come on in," he called, turning to the mirror to run a brush through his hair, marveling at the reflection that stared back at him. The white streak of hair was particularly striking.

"I hope you're hungry," Darcie said, walking up behind him. She held up a picnic basket. "I told the chef to put a little of everything in. I even bribed a bottle of wine out of him. ***White*** wine."

Nick grinned, thankful for her thoughtfulness. It would be a long time before he could enjoy red wine. "I'm famished," he admitted, buttoning up his shirt. He noticed that Darcie's eyes were on his in the mirror. Was it interest that he saw there or was he just imagining it? Surely when she looked at him, she saw Beckett, not any hint of Nick Knight. How could she know anything of the real him to possess a sincere interest?

"I have a question," he said impulsively.

"What?" her eyebrows arched in inquiry.

"You said that everyone sees Sam as me. Do you see me as..." he nodded toward the reflection "...him?"

She nodded. "Yes, we all do, except Al. His neurons and mesons are linked to Sam's, so he sees Sam as Sam and you as you."

"I see. Does his family know about this?"

"His wife does, since she's involved with the Project, but the rest of his family, no."

Wife? Beckett was married? "So, where is she? I haven't met her yet."

"She's taking a vacation with her in-laws. Sam's been leaping for six years and we felt it was time she took a rest. She's a strong woman, but even she needed a break."

"Do you mean that he doesn't come back after each leap?"

She shook her head as if unable to fully explain. "No, something--we say God, time or fate--took over when he stepped into the Accelerator. Now, he leaps from one life to another."

"And he's been gone six years?" Nick was amazed. No wonder they ask the people in the Waiting Room to exercise. "How does his family take this? Aren't they worried?"

"Well, yes, but Donna has told them that Sam is involved in a top secret project and is incommunicado. So far, they've been pretty patient, but we're not sure for how much longer."

"This must be difficult for you all."

"Yes," the auburn haired woman said softly. "It's time for Sam to come home and we are doing everything within our power to make that happen."

"I wish you luck," Nick said sincerely. Then, hesitating a moment, made an effort to lighten the moment when she said nothing more. "Why don't you let me carry that," he offered, pointing to the picnic basket she still held.

She smiled and handed it to him. "Thanks. Are all thirteenth century men so polite?"

Abruptly, he thought of LaCroix and though he felt he controlled his expression well, Darcie asked, "What is it?"

Avoiding her eyes, he shook his head. "Nothing."

Not deterred, she rested a slender, hand on his arm. "You may look like Sam," she told him softly, "but your eyes reveal your soul, not his. Now, what is it, Nick?"

Surprised, his eyes lifted to hers. There was the answer to one of his questions. In some mysterious way, it was to him she reacted, not Beckett.

"I was...just thinking of LaCroix," he said at last. "He could be very polite, very charming, but at the same time ruthless and vicious. He was completely amoral, a vampire without a conscience. I'm glad that Sam won't have to deal with him."

Darcie patted his arm. "Then Sam is lucky that he's no longer a threat."

But as Nick followed her from the room, he felt a

chill down his back. Surely, LaCroix was dead.

* * *

The Cadillac drove very smoothly, its shocks cushioning the bumps of the road so that it was like gliding on air. With Al riding shotgun, Sam took the streets to the west part of town.

"Ziggy says to turn right at the next corner. It should be Walnut street. Maria's house is the third on the left." The hologram gazed ahead of him into the darkness. "I wonder what this woman is going to look like," he mused thoughtfully. "She'll probably be an old hag," he shrugged in distaste, "with warts on the end of her nose."

Sam scowled at his partner, pulled into the drive of a small brick house and turned off the big car. The lawn was well tended, but cluttered with bushes and trees. Vines grew up over the white picket fence surrounding the yard.

Walking up the steps, Sam saw a black cat lying on a porch swing, ignoring them as it meticulously cleaned its fur. "See," Al said as if it confirmed all his predictions. "She even has a black cat. It's probably her medium."

"I think that you've mixed your supernatural domains. Spiritualists have mediums, not voodoo mistresses."

"That reminds me," Al said. "Nick told me to tell you not to call her a witch."

Sam merely looked at Al, and the older man replied innocently, "I was just passing on a message."

As they approached, the fur on the cat's back rose, and it hissed softly in warning. "Nice kitty," Sam said in a soothing tone.

"You better watch it, cat," Al warned. "Cross ***my*** path, and ***you'll*** be the one to end up with bad luck." He waved his cigar in the air, and the cat hissed louder in challenge.

"Yeah, well," the hologram taunted in reply, "I bet your mother ran with all the tomcats in the neighborhood." The black cat hissed again and claws extended, jumped at Al. Howling, it found itself sailing through the hologram and landing in a rose bush lining the walk.

"That'll teach you," Al crowed in triumph, as the cat, tail held high, sprinted in the opposite direction.

"Are you having fun?" Sam asked dryly.

"Well," the Observer said with a defensive shrug and wave in the general direction of the fleeing cat, "he started it."

Sam shook his head in resignation and reached for the door bell. After a brief wait, the porch light came on and the door opened to reveal a hunched over old woman with grey hair. Al gave a triumphant look to Sam. "I told you so."

Ignoring his friend, Sam said politely, "Maria Perez?"

"May I ask who's calling?"

"Nick Knight."

"Oh, Mr. Knight, I didn't recognize you at first. Come in, please." She opened the door further and stepped aside to let Sam into a large living area. "Please have a seat while I get Maria."

After she left, Sam walked around the room looking at the furnishings. It was a nicely decorated room, not what he expected from a so-called voodoo woman.

"Nicholas," a deep, rich toned voice called from the doorway. Startled, he turned so quickly that he nearly lost his balance. The woman standing there surprised him. Not quite five feet tall, she had fine, delicate features framed with coal black curls that fell nearly to her petite waist. Her dress was a deep purple that offset her strikingly lavender eyes. It was an alluring combination without being overly seductive.

"What a knockout!" Al breathed.

"I was surprised when Juanita said you were here," Maria said. "I haven't seen you since you destroyed LaCroix. How have you been?"

That solved one problem, Sam thought. She knows that Nick is a vampire. Now, I just have to make sure that she doesn't find out that I'm not Nick. "Fine. I've been pretty busy with police work."

"Ah, yes. I saw that you had solved that case with that poor model who had been kidnapped and murdered. Such a tragedy." Sam just nodded, hoping he wouldn't be asked for details.

"So, why are you here? Do you need my help with a case?"

"No, actually I was hoping you could help me with an ingredient to a formula." He held out the paper he had copied.

Maria took the paper, her hand barely brushing his. A frown crossed her brow. "Are you well, Nicholas?"

Sam hesitated uneasily, "Yes...why?"

Shaking her head, she said, "It's probably nothing." Still, her eyes lingered on his a moment before she looked down at the paper. "What is this?" Sam exchanged a quick glance with Al, who shrugged and said, "Why not?"

"It's a cure for vampirism. I was hoping you might be able to help me."

She lifted her eyes to Sam and smiled. "Ah, your eternal search has paid off." Looking back at the paper, she continued, "I see your problem. This root, it is extinct, you know."

"I know," Sam said. "Do you have any, or know where I can obtain some?"

"Come back to my storeroom," she said, gesturing with a finely manicured hand. "I will see."

She lead the way through the house into a back room, full of bottles, each neatly labeled and stacked on shelves.

"You're very organized," Sam observed, impressed.

"For a voodoo woman, you mean," she finished. "I could say that you were awfully nice...for a vampire. I find I dislike clutter in my personal life or my professional. Now, let me see." She went over to a shelf and began reading the labels. After a few minutes, she exclaimed, "Here it is." She reached up to the top shelf and started to pick it up.

Sam saw it totter, began to fall, and his only thought was that if it fell, that would end Nick's chance to be human. He started to move toward her and then he was there, quicker than humanly possible. He caught the jar before it hit the ground and held it close to his chest.

"Wow!" Al exclaimed. "You're faster than the Flash!"

"It was a good thing you caught that," Maria said calmly as if he had not just seemingly flickered into place beside her. "That was my last jar." She held out her hand and Sam reluctantly gave it to her. "I'll just measure out how much you need," she said, opening the lid and looking into the jar. "On second thought," she said with a slight frown, "There's not a lot here."

For a terrible moment, Sam thought she might have changed her mind about giving it to him, but then she replaced the lid and held it out to him. As he reached for it, her eyes held his levelly, and he thought perhaps the falling jar had been a test, not an accident. But, if it was, it seemed he had passed as she gave him a slight smile and said, "Take the jar. Whatever's left is yours. I hope it works for you."

"I don't know how I can thank you," Sam began.

"You got rid of LaCroix, that was thanks enough," the woman said, simply. "He was a bad man, that LaCroix."

"Are you sure I can't pay you?"

"No, but you could let me do a reading."

Sam didn't believe in fortune telling, but he didn't believe in vampires before either. He felt uncomfortable agreeing, but couldn't think of a reason

to protest. Would it be his or Nick's future that the woman would see? "Alright."

"Good, come this way." She lead him into another room, lit by candles. A large shallow pan sat on the floor. She knelt before it and motioned Sam to kneel opposite her on the other side. Taking a handful of bones, she shook them in her hand and threw them in the pan.

She studied the pattern they had fallen into, her face showing concern. "Someone close to you is in grave danger. You may be able to save her, but it will be at great cost to you." She looked closer at the bones. "You long to go home, but something or someone prevents you."

Sam exchanged a surprised look with Al then turned back to the woman who was still talking. "You have a good, though mischievous spirit that watches over you and he may be able to help you." Sam saw her brow wrinkle as she frowned. "I see a dark figure threatening you, hovering nearby, but out of sight." She shook her head as though to clear it and sat back on her heels. "That is all I see. Take care... Nicholas." She smiled into his eyes, and suddenly Sam knew for certain that it was him she saw, not the man he was pretending to be.

Flustered, Sam got to his feet, clutching the jar. Surely if she were going to say anything, she would have already done it...or perhaps she already had. "I will and thank you again, Maria."

She nodded, then gracefully rose to show him out. Stopping at her front door, she said, "Remember, beware the dark one."

After she went back into the house, Al said, "I wonder what she meant by 'the dark one?'"

"I don't know, but what about a 'good but mischievous spirit that watches over me?' Sounds like a good description of you. I think"--he cast an uneasy glance over his shoulder--"I think she knows I'm not Nick."

"Yeah?" Al followed Sam's glance. "If she did, doesn't look like she's gonna make an issue of it. But..." he shrugged uneasily, "let's just get outta here, okay?"

"Right," Sam agreed, leading the way to the Cadillac.

"Where are you heading? Over to Natalie's?"

"Yes, I'm hoping that she will have the other ingredients to the formula. If not, maybe, she'll be able to get them. I don't know of many pharmaceutical companies open after dark."

A wave of unexpected weakness swept over Sam.

Suddenly dizzy, he threw out a hand to steady himself against the Caddy's fender. Al circled him worriedly. "You okay?"

"I'm just hungry," Sam said, pushing himself upright. "It comes and goes."

"How long has it been since..." Al hesitated a moment, "since you've eaten?"

Sam didn't meet his eyes. "I haven't. If you remember, you interrupted me." At Al's dismayed look, he said, "Don't worry. I'm glad you did." But deep down, he knew there was a part of him that whispered, 'Liar!'

"Wait a minute. You mean, you haven't eaten, I mean, ***really*** eaten, since you leaped in?" At Sam's nod, he went on, concerned. "No wonder you're weak."

Sam opened the car door. "I promised Natalie that I wouldn't drink blood. It's been hard."

"I hope you're going to be okay," Al said, eyeing him nervously as he appeared to take a seat beside him. "I wouldn't want you to go berserk and start biting people on the neck."

Sam gave Al a censoring look, got in, started the car and pulled out into the street. He didn't tell his friend that was one of his deepest fears. Sometimes, the blood hunger was so strong it seemed impossible to control.

Maybe, he should have drunk the blood. Maybe, he needed it to be able to function. Nick obviously drank it, otherwise why would there be bottles in the refrigerator? Perhaps, he knew the folly of abstaining and only drank what he needed to survive.

Well, soon, he would ***have*** to drink blood. It was part of the formula. It called for the ingestion of human blood before taking the formula in injection form. Sam could only hope that Natalie would have some on hand or could obtain some and a portion of him was appalled at how eager he was at the prospect.

A thought struck him. Turning to Al, he said, "What if I take the formula and become human? How am I going to be able to protect Natalie?"

"Well, maybe by being human, you'll be able to better protect her."

"I don't buy that. You said that she was killed sometime during the night, and that she was drained of blood. A vampire had to have done that."

"You suggested, yourself, that it might have been Nick," Al countered. "Maybe, if you're human, she'll be safe. All I know is that Ziggy thinks that it's important that you get this cure and that it's linked to saving Natalie."

"But, Ziggy has no idea who kills Natalie."

"If she does, she's not talking," Al shook his head. "Maybe, we should get her a male computer to keep her company. She might be in a better mood, then. I think she has perpetual PMS."

Not rising to the bait, Sam concentrated on his driving. "How's Nick doing in the Waiting Room?"

"Well, other than being worried about Natalie, he's having a blast. Darcie took him outside during the sunrise and he's been eating like it's going out of style. He's really enjoying being human again."

"I'm glad," Sam said. "Even living his life like this, it's hard for me to imagine existing for 800 years without eating or seeing a sunrise."

"Yeah," Al agreed. "And what about a sex life? Nick says that he can't have a human woman without wanting to take her blood. Talk about the Black Widow syndrome." The hologram drew deeply on his cigar as he seemed to ponder the subject. "Guess that leaves other vampires. From what I understand, Nick and Jeannette had a thing going off and on over the centuries."

Sam thought of the alluring woman he met at the Raven and could understand why. She definitely had appeal. "I wonder how she's going to react when she finds out that Nick is human again."

"*If* he becomes human," qualified Al. "Nick says she understands his desire to be human, even if she doesn't share it. Now that LaCroix is gone, he doesn't think she will interfere." He looked at his handlink, then up at a street sign. "Natalie's office is the next right."

Sam turned onto the street and parked the Cadillac in front of the pathologist office. "Well, I'd better check in with Darcie," Al said, opening the Imaging Chamber's bright blue door.

Wincing at its painful, unexpected brightness, Sam instinctively ducked his head behind his leather protected arm. Shooting a glance from him to the glowing door, the hologram said contritely, "Oh, sorry, Sam."

Hastily Al stepped into the glare of the light, quickly punching keys on the link to close it. "I'll be back later." The contracting rectangle of light nearly closed off his words, but Sam drew a deep breath of relief when the glare was gone. Being a vampire definitely complicated quantum leaping. He would give a lot--a whole lot--to have a break from both of them.

* * *

Finding himself in front of Natalie's office, he shook his head. "I hope this works out," Sam mumbled to himself.

"What works out?" Natalie asked, standing behind him.

Sam turned quickly. "I didn't realize you were there."

"That's funny," she said, opening the door to her office and going in, leaving him to follow. "You usually hear me coming. What's wrong, are you coming down with some strange vampire illness? You don't look so good."

"No, I just haven't had anything to eat for a while."

"You want me to fix you some tea?" she offered.

Sam shuddered and shook his head. Normally, he liked tea, but just the thought of it made him nauseous. "No, actually, I wondered if you had any human blood."

"Other than what's running through my veins--and I'd like to keep that, thank you--I don't have any at the moment." She waved him to a seat. "Why would you ask me for human blood?" she asked, sitting on the edge of her desk. "You know what I think about drinking that stuff."

"Actually," Sam said, taking out the formula and handing it to her. "I need it for this." He watched as she scanned the pages and saw her eyes widen.

"Is this what I think it is?" Natalie asked, excitedly. Sam could hear her heart rate speed up and her breathing quicken. Uncomfortably, he took a deep breath, trying to control the sudden hunger that assailed him. This was sick! How did Nick ever maintain control and stay sane?

Swallowing hard, he said, "Yes. It's a cure for vampirism. I was hoping you could help me with it."

"This is fantastic!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms around him and giving him a hug. She was so close to him, her neck within inches of his mouth. Her nearness triggered the ever present blood hunger and he could feel the vampire within him demanding to be free. Involuntarily his mouth opened and the sharpened canines extended, his senses acutely aware of the woman in his arms, the beating of her heart pounding in his ears. He wanted nothing more than to lose himself in her blood. Drawn by the siren call of her blood, he lowered his mouth to her neck, closing his eyes against the overpowering need.

No!

"Natalie," he growled, trying to force himself away from the woman. He had to...get away!

She leaned back and looked at him. Seeing his condition, she released him and stepped away. "I'm sorry, Nick," she said shakily. "I should have realized."

Sam closed his eyes, breathing slowly to calm himself. The beating decreased to a subliminal cadence. As soon as he felt he had himself under control, he opened them and told her, "It's okay. It's been a long time and you're a difficult woman to resist."

"When you become human," she said, "you may not find me so irresistible."

Sam shook his head and smiled. "I think any man, mortal or not, would find you irresistible."

She patted his arm and said, "You know just what to say to flatter a woman. It must have been all those centuries of practice." She stopped and looked up at him. "Nick, are you sure you want to give up immortality?"

"Believe me," Sam said, smiling. "Immortality's not all it's cracked up to be. Living different lives can be tiring after a while." Sam could attest to that from personal experience.

She nodded understandingly and sat back down, studying the paper. Sam wondered just what kind of relationship Nick and Natalie had, and how it would change, should he become mortal. Could it be that Jeannette did become jealous and decide to get a potential rival out of the way? If she did, would Nick be able to forgive her if he found out?

"The formula is simple enough. I think I can get all the ingredients, except for this." Natalie pointed to the elusive root.

Sam took the jar out of his pocket and handed to her. "I won't ask you where you got this," she said as she accepted it. "Then, of course, there's the blood we need, but it shouldn't be too difficult to manage. At last resort, I can pull Schanke in and drain a pint off the top," she teased.

Feeling he should react, Sam gave a dismayed look and said, "Anyone but him, please."

Natalie laughed and said, "Okay. It'll be from someone else. I'll have to shop around for the other ingredients during the day. I should have this ready by tomorrow night, why don't we say, around two o'clock in the morning?"

Thinking of Al telling him that Natalie would be killed between one and two o'clock a.m., he said, "Could you be ready a little earlier, say midnight?"

Natalie nodded. "I think so. Are you on duty tomorrow night?"

"No, I've got a couple nights off."

"Good, we don't have any idea what this formula may do to you or how long it will take you to recover." Stopping, she looked at Sam. "Have you decided to give up working nights if you're cured?"

Sam had no idea what Nick would want to do. If it were him, he'd give it up without a thought, but he wasn't Nick, at least not for long. He shrugged, "I really haven't given it much thought. I'll decide when and if it happens. But one thing I do know, is that no matter what happens, I don't want to lose you," he said, certain that it was the way Nick truly felt.

She gave him a curious look. "What do you mean, lose me?"

"Nothing," Sam hedged, "I guess I'm just nervous."

Frowning, she searched his face, "Are you sure you're okay? You're not making much sense."

"I just...I care about you, Natalie. And I'd never want to see you get hurt by trying to help me."

"Don't worry, Nick," she smiled and shook her head. "You've just got yourself jumping at shadows. Even if this doesn't work, you won't lose me." Her smile widened into a teasing grin. "Who would take care of you?"

Then, her attention drawn back to the paper in her hands, she looked away.

Still, Sam couldn't help but worry. He kept hearing Al's words, 'Between one and two o'clock in the morning.'

* * *

The picnic had gone well. Darcie and Nick had eaten their fill, even shared some with the guard, before Darcie sent him on his way. "Don't worry, Corporal," she had said. "Nick's not going to run. Anyway, where would he run to? I'm dismissing you on my authority and if the admiral says anything, I'll take the heat. I want to have a session with my patient."

"If you're sure," the uncertain guard had said.

"Yes, now scram," she said with a grin, borrowing a phrase from Al.

This had left the two of them alone in the courtyard shaded from the late afternoon sun by a lattice of cultivated vines. Fortunately, clouds filtered some of the sun's heat and light as well, but Darcie had insisted on Nick using sunscreen. Without protest, he had complied with her request, and felt quite comfortable sitting in this place with her.

"Do you know what you are going to do if Sam's plan works?" Darcie asked.

"So, this *is* going to be a session," Nick teased. "And here I thought you wanted to get me alone so you could take advantage of me in my weakened state."

Darcie gave him a mock punch on the arm, much similar to what Natalie might have done. "Weakened

state, my foot. You've just eaten enough food to nourish a half dozen men. Now, answer my question."

Nick gave it some thought. "I'm not sure. It's always been a goal, but I've never been this close to it before. I guess I'd keep working at the precinct, at least for a while, but I'd put in a transfer to the day shift. I've had enough nights to last a dozen lifetimes."

Musing, he gazed past the lattice to the distant brightness of the sky. "I'm independently wealthy, so I really don't have to work. But I feel like when I'm helping people, that I'm kind of paying back humanity for all the evil I've done through the years."

"Is that difficult to think about?"

Nick thought of the lives that he had cut short, beginning with the beautiful innocent woman he had drained the first night he had awakened as a vampire. They hadn't all been innocent, but they didn't deserve what he had given them. He was the evil one.

"Yes," he admitted. "I could horrify you with stories of the people I've murdered. I'm a killer, Darcie, no better than a man-eating tiger. I killed for blood, to survive, but that doesn't take the guilt away. And the worst of it is that I asked for this curse. I wanted immortality. In my ignorance and pride, I wanted to live forever."

"And LaCroix gave that to you," Darcie said quietly. "Is that why you killed him?"

Nick shook his head. "No, I killed him because he had just killed a woman I cared about. I killed him because I knew that with him alive, I would never be allowed to become human again. He would always find a way to stop me. At the end, I killed, in hate, my father. The one crime that may be understood, but never forgiven."

He shaded his eyes with one hand. "In a way, I'm afraid of becoming human. If I'm human, I will eventually die and have to answer to God for my sins."

"Do you believe in God?" Darcie asked.

"Oh, yes, I'm afraid I do. And I believe in the Devil. He's sitting there in Hell, waiting for me and his face will look exactly like LaCroix's." Wearily, he put his head down on his knees.

At the touch of a gentle hand on his shoulder, he lifted his head. "Do you remember I told you that we believe that some force is controlling Sam's leaps?" Darcie asked. At his nod, she continued softly, "If God is controlling Sam's leaps, then He hasn't given up on you. Maybe He's trying to give you a second chance to make up for all your sins. You couldn't be as bad as you claim, if you are trying to help humanity, instead

of feeding off it as LaCroix did. You *can* make a difference, even if it is as a vampire."

As she lowered her arm, a small gold cross came into view, that had been nestled between her breasts.

The sight of it did not bring the old fear of sacred objects that had plagued him since LaCroix had bestowed upon him the curse of eternal darkness. Nick stared in fascination as the sun reflected off the precious metal.

"Are you Catholic?" Nick asked, nodding at her necklace.

Darcie looked down at the cross and shook her head. "No, actually, I'm Baptist. Were you Catholic?"

Nick smiled. "There wasn't much choice in western Europe in the thirteenth century. Being a knight, I fought in the Crusades. It was after a battle, I met Jeannette. From the first time I saw her, I was lost. She had a seductive kind of beauty; her eyes promised to take me on a journey of unbelievable ecstacy. I would have given anything to possess her. In the end, I gave my soul."

He looked at the cross again, his eyes sad. "Once, I fought to defend the cross. Now I can't even touch one without being burned."

Darcie met his eyes. Unhooking the gold chain, and lifting it from around her neck, she held it out to him wordlessly.

Nick hesitated, recognizing the offer. ***Would it burn him? Was evil so intangled in his being that the curse would follow him, even into a different body?***

Slowly he extended his palm and she dropped the necklace into it. Closing his fist, he prepared himself for burning pain, but none came. Opening his hand, he stared down at the unscarred flesh, his eyes going wide.

"I *am* human!" he exclaimed.

"You hadn't really accepted it until now, had you?" Darcie asked.

Nick smiled up at her in wonder. "No, I guess I hadn't. You make one heck of a doctor," he said. "You remind me of Natalie, always so hopeful...and so beautiful." His eyes darkened as he thought of the danger the coroner was in.

Darcie put a hand on his arm. "Don't worry, Nick. Sam will make everything all right. He'll save Natalie, and if all possible, find a cure for you."

Nick looked into her eyes, finding reassurance there. "I just feel so useless, like I should be doing something to help."

"You know," she said with an understanding nod, "we call your room the Waiting Room, and, sometimes, waiting is the hardest thing a person can do. Please just trust us...and Sam."

"All right," Nick answered with an attempt at a smile, "I will. You're easy to trust, I knew that from the beginning." His eyes searched hers, "I want to thank you, for everything."

"You're welcome," she said with a grin, breaking the somber mood. "But don't go all mushy on me. I'm just doing my job pinch-hitting as shrink for Verbena, our resident psychiatrist."

"Right," he said lightly, answering in kind. "But, still, I want you to know I couldn't have asked for a better jailer."

"Jailer?!" Darcie grimaced expressively. "Watch your attitude, Detective, or you'll find yourself chained in your coffin!"

"Coffin?" he chided teasingly. "Haven't you gotten beyond the myths yet?"

"Myths," she shot him a sidelong glance. "You mean bats, wolves, peasants with flaming torches and stakes? That sort of thing?"

Something in his expression must have betrayed him for she at once relented. She touched his hand lightly, "I'm sorry, Nick. I was teasing. I didn't mean to bring up old pain."

"It's okay," Nick said, looking away. "It's just that being hunted is not a myth. It would be hard for you to understand the fear we have of being pursued, held captive, and tortured."

"And that's happened to you?" Darcie, who seemed to see much of what he did not say, asked him softly.

The memory of being so nearly caught at dawn in an old barn flashed before him with a terrible reality. Shuddering, Nick shook his head. "Not captured. Just the fact that I am here proves that. But I have been hunted. And I've seen some of us tortured and destroyed."

"I'm sorry. She squeezed his hand firmly. "It must have been horrible."

Nick nodded, letting the feel of her warm hand in his push away the memories. "People tend to hate what they don't understand and they try to destroy what they fear. It's a rare mortal that can look beyond our predatory nature." Lightly, he patted her hand, and then withdrew his own. "I have been lucky over the years, in that I have had a few mortal friends that have accepted me as I am. Natalie is one of those." He met her eyes levelly. "I think, maybe, you are too."

"I don't let people's prejudices sway me," she said, with a smile. "I decide who my friends are. You may have been a predator, but I suspect you are also much more."

"Surviving the centuries has forced me to be

versatile." Shrugging, he guided the conversation from the area into which it had strayed. Some things he did not like to think about--let alone discuss--when he was not certain he knew his own feelings on the subject. "Vampires can't stay in one place too long. People notice when you don't age in twenty years. I've lived in many places, seen many things." "I can understand why being a vampire would hold an appeal," she answered, obviously willing to follow his lead. "To live forever, to see history unfold before you. Archeology has always been a special hobby of mine."

"I was a professor of archeology in Chicago during the 50s."

She nodded. "I know. Ziggy came up with a picture of Nicholas Girard that matched yours. It must have been wonderful seeing history as it unfolded." She turned to face him on the bench, excitement sparkling in her eyes, reminding him of Alyce Hunter. "I was on a dig in the Mesa Verde Park in Colorado when I was younger. Once I even thought about making archeology a career, but chose to be medicine instead."

"I've been a doctor, too," Nick said. "During the Civil War."

Fascinated, Darcie regarded him in amazement. "Is there anything you haven't done?"

"Well," he shrugged. "Eight hundred years is a long time." He looked around at the courtyard, then up at the sky. "There are things I haven't done in so long that it almost feels I never did them."

"What things?" she asked.

Nick took a last look at the broad sky before bringing his eyes back to upturned face. "Seeing how blue the sky could be," impulsively he stroked a lock of her auburn hair, "or how the sun highlights a beautiful woman's hair."

As their eyes met, he saw the desire he felt mirrored there. He brought up a hand and held her cheek, his thumb stroking her jawline. "You are very beautiful," he murmured. He hesitated a brief moment, allowing time for her to move away. Instead, she leaned forward and he covered the full lips with his own.

At first the kiss was hesitant as he held back in fear of hurting her. What if the blood lust had been only sleeping and it surged forward to take him? But, there was no hunger, only the warm feel of his lips on hers and a tingling desire.

Slowly, he increased the pressure and she answered in kind, causing him to draw her closer into his embrace. It was wonderful to hold a woman in his arms without the deadly urge to drain the blood from her. He covered her face with light feathery kisses, then moved

to the delicate fragile skin of her neck. Kissing the pulsing beat of her artery, he felt no bloodlust, no terrible, dangerous hunger, only the exquisite pang of human desire. Sweet desire he had thought he could never experience again.

If he could just hold Natalie in this way. Natalie...whose life was in danger.

With a small sound of reluctance, he pulled away. This was wrong, if he hoped to make any sort of commitment to Natalie. It was wrong to do this now with Darcie, no matter how much both of them wanted it. It wasn't fair to Natalie and it wasn't fair to Sam.

"I..." he began, but found words failed him.

"It's all right," she said softly. "I understand."

"Yes." Regretfully, he drew farther away, catching the elegant scent of her perfume. How could he turn this down? "You would be easy to love too, I think. But..."

"It's the wrong time and wrong place," she supplied, comprehension and a bit of regret shining in her eyes.

"Yes," he agreed, glad that she was so understanding. But somehow, it made it that much harder to reject her love.

"I think it's time we go inside," Darcie said, rising to her feet and extending a hand to him. "Security will be concerned and Al will be back from the Imaging Chamber soon."

"Right," Nick answered with a smile. Taking her offered hand, he got to his feet. "We don't want the admiral hanging the corporal out to dry when he finds us out here alone."

Darcie shook her head. "Al wouldn't do that." She shot Nick a glance that feigned uncertainty. "At least, I don't think he would. But, if he does," she released Nick's hand and headed for the door, "I can handle him."

Laughing, the detective followed. "Of that, I have no doubt."

* * *

Lying awake on the vampire's red silk sheets, Sam sought sleep and found it eluded him. He wondered just how deep the detective's sleep actually was. ***Would he lay helpless while the sun was high in the sky?*** Watching Saturday afternoon vampire movies in Elk Ridge's only cimena had left him with the typical impressions that vampires were mythical creatures who lived by night, sucking blood, and lay dead in their coffins by day.

Shying away from the topic, he sighed, turned over and tried to think of something to distract him. He had

come home minutes before dawn to find a message from Jeannette on his answering machine. She had asked for him to get hold of her as soon as possible. Since it was so late, he decided to wait until that night to contact her. Somehow, he would have to avoid going to the Raven, but he would face that when he had no other choice.

No other choice. It seemed he was faced with that dilemma much more than he liked this leap...like his inability to hold down normal food.

Food. The thought brought him back full circle to his earlier musings. He was hungry...and the last bottle of Nick's private stock was still in the refrigerator. Groaning, Sam punched his pillow in frustration and rolled over on his back, thinking of the liquid stored within such easy reach. He had decided he had better leave one for Nick, just in case the cure didn't work. But, now, it was a temptation he did not know could withstand.

Hungry. He was so hungry.

Resolutely, he forced his eyes to close, glad that Nick didn't subscribed to the theatrical belief that vampires slept in coffins. At least if he was going to sleep, he wouldn't have to do it in a small, enclosed space. The thought of being shut up in a wooden box made him shudder involuntarily. Even though he didn't usually mind enclosed spaces, he still remembered the panic he felt when he had leapt into Nigel Covington's closed coffin. And then he had been certain that vampires were only legend.

It took him longer than normal to get to sleep and once he did, the dreams started.

He had not expected the dreams. Perhaps fueled by his unfed hunger, they seared him with disturbing power. They were haunted with images of endless men and women, both human and vampire. Blood flowed from lacerated veins, only to be swallowed in unending thirst. The sun came up and bodies burned to ashes.

Running, he was running, rushing to save someone. No, he was flying, the ebony wind of the night streaming past him like an invisible banner of silk. Flying, but he would be too late.

Too late, yes. He could see them now, illuminated in a terrible tableau on a city sidewalk, spotlighted with the perfect circle of a street lamp. The vampire crouched over the woman, feeding with a predator's single minded rapture, oblivious to the fact that the woman spilling limply in his arms was dying. Natalie, dying, her eyes open but not seeing the help that swept down to her too late.

'No!' His cry was like a howl, echoing in the

deserted street as his hands came out before him in a effort to tear the vampire away. But, he was still too far away, powerless to stop it. '***No!***'

His second cry drew the predator's attention, his head coming up like a great bird of prey ready to defend his prize against the interloper. Hissing, he spat defiance, his mouth smeared with the precious blood of his prey, his kill, for now there was no faint beat of life from the body in his arms.

Horrified, he continued his dive from the sky, but now his eyes were wide with terror, not narrowed in rage. It was his face, smeared with blood and rendered alien and murderous in the stark light of the lamp. His face, his blond hair with white streak lying over his forehead, his yellow eyes. It was he who fed from Natalie.

Groaning, he fought to escape the nightmare. It did not have to be. But, he was caught within it and though his own face disappeared from view, the terror still had him in its talons. It would not let him go.

As he came closer, the face became older, crueler, the hair blonder. LaCroix. He was certain it was the elder vampire: the ruthless face, the glowing yellow eyes, blazing with anger, the lips stained red with blood, whispering, 'The Nightcrawler waits for you'. It could only be LaCroix.

He woke, gasping, with the sweat of fear covering him. Wiping off his forehead, he was horrified to see the red stain of blood, bringing back the terror of his dream. For a moment, he ***was*** Nick, the 800 year old vampire who fought his own kind of demons. He fought the disorientation and forced himself to think calmly. ***He was Dr. Samuel Beckett, quantum physicist, time traveler, Nobel prize winner, son of John and Thelma Beckett, brother to Katie and Tom...*** Looking at the bedside clock, he saw with vast relief that it was almost eight p.m., well past dusk.

Getting up, he went straight to the shower. The water washed away the blood sweat and relaxed his tense muscles, but couldn't take away the fear that something was going to go wrong. Something was not right, he could feel it.

After dressing, he listened to the new messages on his answering machine. There was another message from Jeannette, this one even more concerned than the last. Checking Nick's address book he found the Raven's phone number and punched it in. A strange voice answered and he asked to speak to Jeannette. Immediately, she came on.

"Nicholas, is that you?" The French accented voice was almost frantic.

"Jeannette?" Sam said, avoiding the direct question. "What's wrong?"

"I must see you tonight. It's very important. Will you come?" It sounded more a demand than a request.

Thinking of Nick's warning to stay away from the Raven, he cast about for a believable excuse but found none. And, still there was the feeling of foreboding, that something was very, very wrong. Maybe there was something that needed to be righted at the Raven. "If it's that important," he said, "I can be there in fifteen minutes."

"That long. Can't you fly?"

Fly? Sam thought in horror. ***No way!*** "No, I'm not feeling very well. I don't think I should fly."

"'Not feeling very well'?" she repeated in concern. "What's wrong?"

Damn, now he had her suspicious. "Nothing," he said. "I'm just a little tired. I didn't sleep very well. The dreams," he hesitated, but he had already begun, there was nothing to do but finish lamely, "you know."

Evidently, she did, for she gave no further protest. "Very well, I will see you in fifteen minutes, but please hurry."

She hung the phone up quickly as if to speed him along. Grabbing Nick's coat and car keys he turned toward the door. Briefly, he hesitated, thinking about adding Nick's gun, but decided that bullets probably wouldn't help him against a vampire, anyway. He left the apartment quickly, feeling the sense of unease that had lingered after the dreams begin to grow into urgency.

He was just backing the Caddy out of Nick's garage, when Al appeared.

"Hi, Sam," Al began as Sam peeled around the corner and out to the street, leaving the Observer standing alone in the garage. "Hey," he shouted as he hastily manipulated the link to adjust his speed to Sam's, "Where's the fire?"

"Jeannette's," he said shortly, not in the mood for an argument but knowing he would get one all the same as the hologram appeared to settle in beside him. "She wouldn't tell me what's wrong, only that it was important."

"Jeannette's? Are you nuts?!"

"I have to, Al," Sam said grimly, eyes on the road.

"Why?!"

"I don't know. My gut just tells me it's important."

"Yeah, well," Al grumbled, "your gut's been telling you to drink that disgusting hemoglobin cocktail. I

don't think you should listen to it." When Sam did not change course, the Observer increased his protest. "Sam, you can *not* go to the Raven."

"Why not?"

"Because," the handlink in Al's pocket beeped and he drew it out with an impatient sigh. Consulting it quickly, he renewed his argument with new vigor. "Because," he waved the link as evidence, "you've changed something. Now, Natalie dies in two hours."

Sam looked at his watch. It read nine-fifty. "I thought she was killed somewhere between one and two."

"Something changed that. Now, it's just after midnight," Al exclaimed. "So you better get over there and *forget* the Raven."

"I don't know, Al. I have a feeling that what Jeannette wants to tell me has something to do with Natalie. I'll hurry and I'll be careful. But, I've got to go."

* * *

The club was not as full as it had been the night Sam had leapt in and the music not as loud. Jeannette met him near the door and guided him to a back room. Al followed, suspiciously eyeing the dancers as if he expected them to jump out and attack him with sharpened fangs.

The heavy material of the curtain over the doorway served to only muffle the music slightly as it settled behind Jeannette. Not seeming to notice, she turned to Sam, speaking almost in a breathless rush, "Nicki, there is something very wrong. Someone has been killing and leaving their victims in conspicuous spots."

Obviously agitated, she paced the dimly lit room, gesturing expressively. Al's eyes followed her intently as she turned to Sam, rushing on in what seemed near panic. "It happened twice last night and already once tonight. Fortunately, one of us found the first two bodies and disposed of them, but the one tonight was found by a police officer before we could get to it. It was only a block away!" There was real panic in her voice. "Then just a few minutes ago I find out that a body was found the night before last, near your building. Fred had taken care of it, but just now got around to telling me."

"Do you have any idea who did it?"

Jeannette shook her head in distress. "No, and if I find out, I'll..." Drawing a deep breath, she halted in her rush and turned to face him in an obvious effort to calm herself. "Either it's someone gone renegade or a fledgling, who hasn't yet learned control. If I find

that one of us has brought someone over and not taught them the basic rules, I'll..." she trailed off and looked sharply at Sam. "***You*** haven't, have you?"

Startled, Sam reacted instinctively. "Me? No!"

Jeannette expression softened into a smile. "I didn't think you did, mon cherie. After your experience with Natalie's brother, I thought you would have learned your lesson, but I had to ask."

Natalie's brother? Sam thought, wondering if Nick had changed Natalie's brother into a vampire. ***If so, what had happened? Where was he now?***

"What are we going to do?" Jeannette asked, drawing near.

Sam had no answers. If the 'renegade vampire' was the one that was going to try to kill Natalie, he had to stop him...or her. ***But how did you stop a renegade vampire?*** "Can we make sure that no one goes out alone? And have them watch out for anyone new in the area."

"I'll put out the word," Jeannette agreed. "I'm just afraid if it doesn't stop, we'll have another witch hunt on our hands." She hesitated, then asked, "I know you said that you destroyed LaCroix. Are you positive that he's really dead? Could he have come back?"

"Unh oh, Sam," Al put in. "Nick says LaCroix is bad news. If it's him, you're dead meat." Shrugging at the covert look Sam shot him, he shrugged apologetically, "No pun intended."

Sam tried to ignore the hologram and spoke to Jeannette. "How could it be LaCroix if he was destroyed?" he said, trying to sound confident. "I'll do some checking, see what I can find out." He turned to leave, his mind already turning to the matter.

"Nicholas," her hand on his arm stopped him. "Are you sure you are all right? You look pale."

Sam turned back to her reluctantly. "I'm fine," he mumbled, pulling away from her hand. He couldn't take the chance that she might sense something that would give him away. "Like I said on the phone, I didn't sleep well and since you wanted me here right away, I didn't have time to eat."

"Ah, I'm sorry, cherie," she said, moving closer to a suddenly nervous Sam. "Won't you drink something before you go? Or at least take something with you. I'm all out of bovine, but I just got a shipment in from my contact at the blood bank. You need to keep your strength up, especially if you're going to find out who's doing these killings."

Sam hesitated, then thought of the cure. He needed to drink blood--human blood--before the injection. But, Jeannette knew that Nick didn't drink human blood. It would be out of character to accept. Somehow, he had

gotten by when he had leapt in without raising her suspicions, but Sam didn't want to push his luck. A part of him was horrified at the disappointment he felt when he refused her offer.

"No, thanks, Jeannette," he said, moving away. "I have some at home. I'll let you know what I find out."

"I'll call you if I hear anything else," she promised. "Be careful, Nicki."

"I will," he assured her. Hastily, anxious to be away from the Raven and its temptations, he left the club. Al followed closely behind him, as if fearing to be left on his own with the lovely vampire.

Reaching the sidewalk, the Observer, still close on Sam's heels, said, "This is too hinky, Sam. What are you...."

Unwittingly an overweight, balding middle aged man cut across the holograms words, stopping Sam as he reached for the car door. "Hey, Nick," he called. "Wait up."

At the overpowering scent of garlic from the man's breath, Sam instinctively drew back sharply, bumping against the Caddy. The man, noticing his reaction, shrugged and said, "Sorry, Nick, if I had known I was going to meet up with you, I wouldn't have eaten that Slouvaki with extra garlic for supper."

Sam swallowed hard in an effort to control the rising nausea and it helped when the man backed up a step.

Behind him, Al conferred with Ziggy and supplied, "This is Don Schanke, Nick's partner. He calls him Schanke or Schank."

"What are you up to in this part of town, Schanke?" Sam asked.

"The guys in blue found a stiff a block away. The only marks on him were two punctures on his neck. He looks like he's lost a lot of blood, but there's nary a drop at the scene."

The heavy man shrugged, "I'm wondering if we got another sicko out there like that blood bank tech. Maybe a copycat killer. I'm canvassing the neighborhood and I thought I'd check in with your friend, Janet, and see if she's heard anything. I know you told me not to go in there, but, hey, duty calls."

Sam hesitated. Jeannette definitely would not be happy to see Schanke inside her club asking questions, especially reeking of garlic. "I just talked with *Jeannette*," he said. "She mentioned that a body had been found, but she didn't have any idea who the murderer might be. She said she'd let me know anything she hears."

"Oh," Schanke looked disappointed to have lost his

chance to go into the Raven. "Okay." His frown was replaced by a leer. "So, tell me, how's your night off? Did you stop in at the Raven to get a little dancing in? Or maybe something more?"

The suggestion in the voice left little to the imagination. Innuendo from a hologram was enough. This, he didn't need. As if unaware of his partner's irritation, Schanke rambled on, gesturing to make his meaning even more clear, "There's some pretty hot stuff in there. Grade A oven mitt material. If I weren't married, I'd show you a thing or two about handling it."

"Uh, Schanke," Sam interrupted, holding onto the threads of his temper. "I have to go. I'm meeting Natalie."

"What? Two women in one night?" the balding man asked in feigned shock. "You know what they say about burning the candle at both ends. You're liable to get scorched in the middle."

At Sam's scowl, he sighed, "Okay, okay, I'll see you tomorrow," Turning, he headed off down the sidewalk, calling over his shoulder as he went, "Tell Nat hi and don't do anything I wouldn't do. But," he grinned, "if you do, take pictures."

"Ugh," Al said, when the detective had left. "What a sleaze!"

Sam turned and stared at Al in amazement, allowing the look to speak for itself. Eyebrows lifting, the Observer looked offended. "Sam," he protested, "you're not implying that ***I'm*** a sleaze. That man," he shrugged in the direction the detective had taken, "is not even ***near*** my class."

Blandly, Sam said only, "If you say so."

Ignoring the sputter of protest coming from behind him, Sam turned again to the Caddy. His thoughts returned to the worrisome problem at hand as he got into the vintage automobile. When Al appeared to sit beside him, he said to the hologram, "I don't know, Al, the more I think about it, the more I think that this renegade vampire must be the same vampire that kills Natalie."

An unwanted vision of himself crouched in a pool of light, a lifeless Natalie in his arms flashed before him and he suppressed a shudder. He couldn't even think about that. He had to escape the vampire within, but... He continued the thought aloud, "How am I going to be able to protect her, if I take the cure?"

Al punched in data to the link, shaking his head at what he got in return. "I don't know, Sam. Ziggy just says that the cure is connected with saving Natalie, so it looks like you have to take it if you want to save her. Look, let me go check with Ziggy...and Nick. He

might know something about this killer." Al opened the Imaging Chamber door. Stepping inside quickly, he promised as he keyed in the sequence to close the blinding door, "I'll be back before midnight."

* * *

Nick and Darcie were sitting in the recreation room, playing cards when Al found them. The doctor saw him first and smiled. "Hello, Al. How's Sam doing?"

The admiral shrugged. "He's weak. He hasn't eaten anything or," he hesitated before plunging ahead, "or *drank* anything since he leapt in. But," he swallowed hard, "he's going to take care of that. He's just left the Raven to go to Natalie. She's supposed to have some blood ready for him."

"He's been to the Raven?" Nick asked, concerned. "But I told you to keep him away from Jeannette. If she..."

"Don't worry, she didn't have any idea he wasn't you," Al said, gesturing soothingly. "But, she did have some disturbing news. There have been three vampire kills since last night. Whoever did it left the bodies in places where they would be easily found. She's worried that the media will get hold of it, and there'll be a mass panic with people armed with stakes, hunting for vampires."

Nick got slowly to his feet, his face haunted by old pain. Shaking his head, he said softly, "It's happened before. I can understand why she would be concerned."

"It seems that some of your vampire friends found the first two bodies and took care of them, but the authorities found the last one, only a block from Jeannette's club. We met your partner, Schanke, outside the Raven. He's investigating the case. Sam steered him away from the club."

Pacing the room, Nick said irritably, "I should be there. I should be helping."

"I know you feel like you're helpless," Al said, realizing that Nick was a man of action, unwilling to let other people control his destiny. "But, the information that you've given us, is very helpful. Sam thinks it might be the same killer that's going to go after Natalie tonight. He's on his way to her office now." At the expression on Nick's face, he added, "Don't worry, he'll protect her."

"I hope he can. He won't be able to defeat a vampire as a human. He'll have to meet him or her on his terms. That means a vicious fight."

"Sam can do it," Al said, hoping his voice sounded more confident that he felt. Sam hadn't looked good

when he had last seen him, not good at all. "Do you have any ideas who this renegade might be?"

Nick thought for a long moment. "In some ways, vampires are like humans. There are evil ones whose only concern is with their own satisfaction. Then, there are ones like Jeannette and myself who don't prey on humans any longer."

The detective shrugged diffidently, as unwilling to dwell on it. "We obtain our nourishment from bottles of blood. The only person that I can think of that would kill so boldly is LaCroix and he's dead.

Turning away, he said softly as though trying to convince himself, "I *know* I destroyed him. But," he turned back to meet Al's gaze, "then again, I thought he was dead once before."

The admiral frowned, "What's this LaCroix guy look like, anyway?"

"He has short blond hair," Nick answered, and from his tone, it was obvious that he was envisioning the other vampire's face. "And cold blue eyes that seem to burn right through you."

His gaze went back to Al's. "If it is him, Sam is going to have to keep Natalie away from him. He's quick and deadly. He can drain a human within seconds."

Al shuddered, "Sounds like a prince of a guy."

Nick's voice firmed, "Sam's going to have to destroy whoever it is. That's the only way to stop a mad vampire. A stake through the heart, decapitation, being exposed to the sun or fire. But...at the same time, he's going to have to protect himself and Natalie."

Tucking his hands into his pockets, Al rocked back on his heels and regarded Nick carefully though his tone was casual as he said, "He's worried that if he takes the cure, he won't be able to protect her."

Nick nodded. "If it comes between saving Natalie's life and my becoming human, I would rather be a vampire for 800 more years, than to have Natalie killed or turned into a vampire herself." He met the admiral's eyes firmly. "You tell him that Natalie's safety comes first."

Al nodded, his gaze steady in unspoken approval. "I'll tell him."

* * *

When Sam walked into her office, Natalie was working at her counter. Looking up with a smile, she said, "Hi, Nick. I'm almost ready."

She turned her attention back to the liquid she was drawing from a flask with a hypodermic needle. "I

couldn't get my hands on any fresh blood, so I donated a unit of my own," she said, most of her concentration on what she was doing. "It's over in the refrigerator."

Looking closely at the syringe, she squirted out a little to remove an air bubble. "I had to sweet talk the human vampires at the blood bank into drawing a unit for me to take with me. I told them I was doing an experiment for the department."

Sam smiled at the old joke of lab techs being vampires. Best as he recalled with his swiss cheese memory, they didn't find it particularly amusing. "But they let you have it?"

"Yes, but I had to promise to donate at the blood drive in two months."

"Another thing I owe you for."

"Who's counting?" she shrugged but shot him a smile. "And what's a pint or two of blood between friends?" Recapping the needle of the syringe she held, she laid it down on the counter. "Speaking of friends," she said, "have you told Jeannette what you're going to do?"

Sam went over to the refrigerator and got out the fresh unit neatly labeled with her name. "No, I haven't. I didn't want her to try and stop me." His back still to Natalie, he considered his next words. "She did call tonight," he said at last, turning to her. "She had some bad news." Crossing back to her, he laid the cold bag on the counter beside the syringe.

"What kind of bad news?"

"There have been three vampire attacks since last night."

"What!? Three? I heard Schanke was on a case tonight, but he hasn't checked in yet. Dr. Patterson went to the scene, since I'm officially off duty." Natalie regarded him across the counter, her eyes concerned, "Are you sure they're really vampire killings?"

"Jeannette's sure," Sam said, his attention slightly distracted by the bag of blood resting between them.

"Then does she have any idea who did it?"

Pulling his eyes from the blood, Natalie's blood, he shook his head, "No, she doesn't. Some of her patrons at the Raven found the first two victims, but a patrolling cop found the one tonight only a block away from the club."

With an effort, he forced himself not to reach out for the blood and continued in what he hoped was an even voice. "Jeannette's upset by the whole thing. She's concerned that a vampire has gone renegade or that someone's converted a new vampire and it's out of control."

"Like Richard." Natalie's voice was very near a

whisper, as if it was an echo from the heart, not a comment meant for him.

Sam didn't reply. Richard must be Natalie's brother. From the shadow that had veiled her eyes, he suspected that she didn't expect a reply, anyway, so he merely nodded. Whatever had happened, it seemed over--and it seemed it hadn't been good. "I met Schanke outside the club, investigating the scene."

She shook her head as if to clear it, then briskly picked up the blood bag and handed it to him. "Here, you start on this."

Sam looked at the bag, wondering now that it was time to drink the blood if he was going to be able to go through with it. Hesitantly, he looked at Natalie and said, "Do you have a glass?"

"I'm fresh out of wine glasses," she said with a smile. "How about a coffee cup?" Handing him a clear glass mug she added teasingly, "You know, the first time I met you, you drank directly out of the bag. Messy eater, too."

She shook her head fondly. "Of course, at the time, you were about three pints low. Bombs are messy when you jump on them." Her smile faded slowly. "You do realize," she went on, "once you're human, you're not going to be able to do that anymore. You won't be indestructible. No more grabbing grenades out of the middle of the air, no more bullets going right through you with no damage. You're going to have to be careful."

Sam thought she was talking to the wrong person, but he agreed. "You just keep reminding me of that." He looked at the bag. Now, how to get the bag opened without spilling blood all over the place. Normally, he'd use a needle and syringe, but...

Natalie took the bag, pulled out a pair of scissors and snipped off the port at the top. "There you go. For a vampire, sometimes you're pretty helpless."

Sam smiled and took back the bag. Then the smell hit him and he almost dropped it. A few drops spilled on his hand and he stood staring at them, mesmerized and sickened at the same time.

"Nick? You okay?"

Nodding, he shakily poured some of the blood into the cup. Now that he actually needed to drink it, he hesitated. He had spent the entire time he had been here, resisting its temptation and now that it was time, he wasn't sure he could do it.

"Why don't you sit down, before you fall down?" Natalie suggested. "What's wrong? You act as if you've never drank blood before."

'I haven't,' Sam wanted to say, as he sat down.

"I'll be fine. I'll just be glad when I don't have to drink this stuff, anymore."

"So will I. Now, get it over with," she ordered, picking up the syringe she had filled.

Sam brought the cup up to his lips, fighting down the nausea that unexpectedly assaulted him. ***You have to drink it,*** he told himself. ***Think of the nasty tasting cough medicine that Mom used to make you drink. It's the same kind of thing...sort of.*** He tilted the cup and drank a long swallow, trying not to taste it.

Again, he was struck by the acute sensation as the blood was absorbed into his bloodstream. He felt the strength flow back into his muscles and was amazed at the extent of his earlier weakness. Was this what it felt like to be a fully functioning vampire? It was all the encouragement he needed, with the needs of the vampire fully stirred and demanding to be met. He drank again, quickly losing his self consciousness about drinking blood in front of Natalie. He poured more of the dark red fluid in the cup and drained it.

"Now," she said, walking toward him, holding the syringe. "Give me your arm. In no time, you'll be eating hamburgers and playing out in the sun."

"No, I don't think so," came a cold voice from behind Sam.

He turned, but saw only a blur as the figure moved quicker than the eye could see. Suddenly, it was standing at the counter holding the glass flask. This had to be LaCroix. It was the same blond vampire from the dreams.

Behind him, the Imaging Chamber door opened, and Al came through, head down as he worked with the hand link. "Sam," he began, cutting off the sentence abruptly as he lifted his head and took in the scene. "Unh oh," he groaned, "this doesn't look good."

"Still trying to become human, Nicholas?" LaCroix said, cutting across the hologram's words, his eyes glaring with an unholy light and the blood from a recent kill still crimson on his lips. "When are you going to realize that it was I that made you, and I will be the one to decide when you will be released?" He threw the flask to the floor, breaking it in small pieces, its precious liquid splattering across the tiles.

"Oh," he said with a terrible, somehow caressing tone to his voice, "I'll release you--forever--but first, I think I'll have a little fun with your friend. She must be punished for trying to take you away from me."

Al, who had been frantically feeding information into the link shouted, "Sam, you can't let him near her. It's LaCroix, somehow's he's come back."

"I know that," Sam hissed in his friend's direction.
LaCroix laughed. "I'm glad you agree with me. Perhaps, she doesn't mean as much to you as I thought."
Revealing his fangs in a terrible parody of a smile, LaCroix turned toward Natalie, but Sam was quicker. Reacting instinctively with the strength that sang through him, he attacked in a flying kick and knocked the blond vampire down. "Leave her alone," he warned, and heard his own voice as a throaty growl. The Change surged through him and he sensed his own eyes now had the same yellow glow as his enemy's. The blood had given him strength. ***Would it be enough?***
Almost thoughtfully, LaCroix rubbed his jaw where the kick had landed and got to his feet. "So," he said with pleased amusement in his voice, "this is someone you feel passionately about. Are you willing to die for her, I wonder?" Like a viper, he struck before his words were barely finished, taking Sam unaware.
The blow caught the physicist in the chest, sending him flying. Instinctively, he rolled as he landed and was coming to his feet when the elder vampire came at him again. Snarling, he met the blow squarely, the force throwing both of them to the ground.
The challenge sang through him, sending him for the other's throat. This woman was his, this territory was his, and he would ***not*** be threatened! The dance of thrust, kick and parry came from a dark sense deep within him that sent him snarling again and again for the intruder's throat.
"Sam! Damn it, Sam! Listen to me!"
The growl rumbling in his throat, Sam's head swung to regard the new intruder. ***Who..?*** Al.
"Use your head, Sam!" the hologram was shouting at him. "He's older than you, stronger! He's playing with you."
Playing. Momentarily, his own snarl growing in his throat threatened to drown out the Observer's words. But, the trusted, rough voice broke through the blood rage. "Nick would have done all these things, reacted this way. You've got to do something different!"
Different. He was not a vampire...not fully. He was Sam Beckett, and he was here to prevent this, not to let Natalie die while he was trapped in some futile, primal instinct that drove him like a blood maddened beast. He had to use his mind to keep LaCroix from using his vampire powers to kill Natalie. ***Vampire powers!***
Head swinging back to LaCroix, who was waiting like a patient predator, Sam let the primal growl in his throat swell again and attacked. This time, however, he hit fast, then moved quickly to where the frightened

coroner stood. Grasping the forgotten syringe from Natalie's hand before she could protest, he turned back to face Nick's old foe.

"Nicholas," the ancient vampire said chidingly, "the cure will do you no good. I will only bring you over again," he smiled, revealing the terrible fangs, "and again. You can never escape me." Moving more quickly than Sam thought possible, he grasped Natalie, pulling her to him as he finished the threat. "Nor can your woman."

At Sam's instinctive move forward, LaCroix cautioned, "Ah," and grasped her hair with a powerful hand.

"Careful, Sam," Al warned. "He can snap her neck before you can take a step."

"You're wrong, LaCroix," Sam growled. "I can escape you. Tomorrow, with the dawn. I'll watch the sunrise and I'll be free."

"Suicide, Nicholas?" the blond scoffed. "How foolishly mortal of you. You will not do it. The life is too strong in you."

"I will," Sam said, his eyes never leaving the other's glowing gaze. "If you hurt her, I'll step out into the sun, and you'll never have the satisfaction of taunting me again."

"No," LaCroix drew hard on Natalie's hair, forcing her head back to reveal her throat. Snarling, he lowered his head slowly, eyes still fixed on Sam in challenge.

"Take her if you want her," Sam said, falling a step, then two, away. "But while you do, I'll leave."

"I'll follow," LaCroix hissed, his lips only inches from a terrified and silent Natalie's throat.

"But you will not find me. Not in the space of the few hours of the night remaining and I will burn in the dawn." The cool syringe was a tiny, fragile hope in Sam's clenched hand. "Have her, and you'll lose me forever."

Enraged, LaCroix flung the woman from him and in a blur of movement too rapid to follow, leapt forward. In his flying swoop over the top of the lab counters, he tore a shelf's brace from its place with a terrible grace. "You are mine!" he roared, rushing toward Sam in a predator's strike. "Mine to keep! Mine to destroy!"

"Sam! Look out!"

Al's shout was lost in the sound of breaking glassware tumbling from the broken shelf and desperately Sam brought up the syringe before him. This was his only chance! "Natalie!" he shouted, hoarsely. "Run!"

Diving aside, he felt himself caught and jerked about like a child. Pain flared across his back as the

other vampire flung him against the counter and bent him backward over it. The hologram was right. LaCroix had been only playing with him. Pinned in an inescapable grip, he saw death above him, final destruction in the form of a jagged piece of wood held high above his chest.

"Sweet irony, Nicholas," LaCroix hissed, "that your destruction is in the form that you chose for me."

His hand started downward toward Sam's chest and the physicist played the final, desperate ace he had bet on so heavily. Using the syringe like a dagger, he plunged the needle into the vampire's jugular and drove the liquid into him.

Roaring like a wounded beast, LaCroix leapt away, hand going to his neck. Glowing eyes wide, he glared at Sam. "Idiot," he hissed, "to think a little bee sting such as this..." Abruptly, he staggered, and something akin to fear crossed his contorted face. "What have you done?"

Slowly, as if his strength were bleeding away, he collapsed to the floor. His pale skin seemed to redden as Sam watched, and the yellow faded from his eyes to be replaced by a pale blue.

"He's given up Nick's only chance to be human," Al said quietly, from the sideline. "Now, I understand what Ziggy meant." He looked from the stricken vampire to Sam. "The cure *was* connected to saving Natalie. You've cured LaCroix so he can't kill her, tonight, or any other night, by draining her blood."

"I've made you human," Sam said to LaCroix, finding himself unable to look away from the man who had been responsible for so much pain. Suddenly, he was tired, so very tired. His own vampiric strength seemed to ebb away, the pain in his canines subsiding and the light in the lab no longer painfully bright. But...the beast was only sleeping. It would return, with the scent, with the need for blood, and perhaps now he had given away any chance to destroy it.

He had won--he had prevented Natalie from being killed--but at what cost? Now, Nick might not ever be human. Surely, this could not be the way it was meant to be. He must have missed something, anything that might yet...

"No," LaCroix grated hoarsely, "I won't be human, I won't be weak!"

Enraged beyond reason, he picked up the stake and came at Sam again, running this time, not flying, but deadly all the same. Grabbing the up-raised wrist and twisting it, Sam was horrified to hear the crack of fragile human bones a heartbeat before the stake fell to the floor. Appalled, Sam released him, and jumped back.

Screaming in pain and anger, LaCroix charged him again. Reluctant to inflict any more damage, Sam side stepped with inhuman quickness. LaCroix's momentum, fueled by his rage, carried him into the autopsy table. Sam turned, ready for another attack, but LaCroix did not rise.

The moment stretched impossibly long as Sam stood, waiting. Still there was no movement from the fallen form. Finally, it was Natalie that moved. Slowly, she approached the man, her step shaky, but determined.

Sam put out a hand to stop her. "No," he said. "Let me."

Cautiously he drew near, and extended a hand to LaCroix's shoulder. Even before he touched him, he knew. There was no beating heart, no sound of breath in the lungs. The curse that still lived in Nick's body, sown by the man who lay before him, told him that the man was dead.

Swallowing hard, he turned him over. On his temple was a slowly bleeding wound that bespoke an injury to his skull and the fragile mortal brain within it. "He's dead," Sam said heavily, pushing himself to his feet. "He must have hit the corner of the table. There's nothing we can do."

From one moment to the next, the change in the body began. Mortal tissue began to grey in rapid decomposition that was terrible to see. Natalie made a soft sound in her throat, and Sam turned to pull her away. "The body's ancient," he said. "It should have gone to dust centuries before this."

Feeling sick, he turned away himself, his arm about the woman he had saved at such a cost. "Nick," she said softly, looking up into his face, "are you okay?"

Somehow he could not find the will to answer. The cure was gone, Nick's chance at mortality with it.

Al's voice, roughly reassuring, came from behind his other shoulder. "You had to do it, Sam. It was the only way to save Natalie. Listen, I'm going to tell Nick. You'll be leaping out of here any minute. Sam? Do you hear me?"

Drawing a deep breath, Sam forced himself to nod.

The door to the Imaging Chamber opened and Al hesitated. "You had to do it, Sam. You saved Natalie." The hologram walked through and Sam bowed his head.

Sometimes, life just wasn't fair.

"Nick," the doctor placed her hand on his arm. "I want to thank you for saving my life. That's another one I owe you." Lightly, she kissed him on the cheek and smiled up into his eyes.

Bewildered, Sam regarded her. How could she be so...

"I think," she said with a smile, "I'll start paying right now." Moving away, she took a small bottle out of a drawer and held it up. "I had already drawn up one bottle of the cure before you came in. I thought maybe you might have some friends that would want to become human."

Stunned, Sam stared at her. Could it be that he hadn't blown Nick's only chance? Was there still hope? He watched Natalie draw the fluid into a syringe.

Turning to him, she said, "Well, are you going to roll up your sleeve or do you want to wait for the next vampire to come in?"

Hastily, Sam obliged, exposing a vein. Tying a tourniquet about his arm with a brisk professionalism, she cleansed the skin, then injected the fluid. He felt the sting of the needle and a liquid that burned like fire flowing into his vein. The cure.

The fire engulfed him, searing him like the sun. What if it had gone wrong? What if he should have waited until he leaped? What if... Clenching his teeth against a groan, he slid to the floor, drawing Natalie with him.

"Nick? Are you okay?" The concerned voice came from far away.

It hurt too much to answer, too much to even *think* of answering. Closing his eyes, he struggled to relax, to let the healing fluid do its work. It had to be right. Had to. He couldn't have come this far, fought this hard to die like this. He wasn't...

He wasn't hurting quite so badly. The thought was an amazement. Maybe it was going to be okay. After several long moments, he took a deep breath, finding that it didn't hurt to breathe.

"Nick?" There was a soft hand on his cheek.

Sam opened his eyes, finding Natalie regarding him worriedly. "How do you feel?"

"Better." His voice was hoarse with remembered pain.

"Did it work?"

Did it? Reluctantly, Sam called silently to the vampire within him. There was no answer, no change he could feel, but he wasn't sure if he could awaken the beast by will power alone anyway. "I'm not sure." "A test?" she asked softly, smiling.

"What?" he asked, confused.

"You said the last time you kissed a human woman, you nearly killed her. I'm willing to be your guinea pig."

"But, if I'm not..."

Her eyes were sparkling. "It's in the name of science, isn't it? How could I pass this up?" She

smiled in complete candor. "Anyway, do you have any idea how long I've waited to have you kiss me?"

Hesitantly, he leaned forward and put his lips against hers, waiting for the blood hunger to come. When it didn't, he wrapped his arms more firmly around her, and brought her up against his body. It was the closeness to her body before that had brought forth the beast. When the kiss deepened, he felt a stirring and started to pull away, feeling that he should maintain control just in case.

Moving against him, she entangled her hands in his hair, refusing to let him go. Relenting, he gave up the idea of stopping the experiment. Feeling the sweet pang of desire, but no yearning to sink his teeth into her neck, he recognized the arousal as purely human male. Tenderly his lips traveled down to her throat, kissing the delicate skin.

There was no pain in his canines, no blood hunger that threatened to wrest control from him. Only the ache of desire, sending wildfire through his body, the tingling of electricity...

A leap.

No, not yet.

But, the leap took him.

* * *

When Nick opened his eyes, he found himself sitting on the floor of Natalie's office with his arms around her waist and his lips pressed against her neck. He felt a deep hunger of arousal for the woman so close to him. ***NO! I can't do this!***

Fighting against temptation, he forced himself away. Had he already hurt her?

"What's wrong, Nick?" Surprised, her eyes lifted to his.

Relief rolled through him as he realized that the woman he loved was unharmed. "'What's wrong?'" his voice rose in amazement as he pushed himself to his feet and ran a shaky hand through his hair. "I have my teeth at your throat and you ask me what's wrong?" Looking quickly around him, he saw a badly decomposed body nearby. ***So Al was right, Sam did kill LaCroix.***

"But the cure worked," Natalie said, her voice now uncertain as she got to her feet as well. "Didn't it?"

Cure? But Al had said that Sam had used the cure on LaCroix and that LaCroix had destroyed the remaining bottle. ***Had she kept some in reserve? Could he actually be cured? Was he so used to being human, that he hadn't noticed the changes in his body?*** Turning to her, he searched for words but found none. Dare he

hope? Stunned, he stood silent a long moment and she faltered uncertainly. "Nick?"

How could he be sure he would not hurt her if he allowed himself to express the love he felt? Turning on his heel, he strode over to her desk. "What is it?" Natalie asked as he opened the drawer and rifled through the contents until he found the piece of jewerly he was looking for.

Holding up the necklace by its chain, he stared at the gold cross, so like the one that Darcie had worn around her neck. This one had burned him before, not badly, but enough. The sight of it brought no repugnance, but he had to make sure.

Slowly, he brought his other hand up and dropped the cross into it. He clenched his fist. When he felt no fiery agony, he opened his eyes and looked at Natalie, almost unable to believe it himself. She was staring back at him in concern.

Natalie walked up to him and took his clenched fist in her hands, gently prying it open. He looked down at his hand as she picked up the delicate necklace and traced his unmarked palm with her fingers.

Lifting his eyes to her tear-filled ones, he finally allowed himself to believe. "I'm human," he whispered.

"Human!" The word was a shout, and he caught her into his arms, swinging her about with the sheer exuberance of the discovery.

Laughing, Natalie rejoiced with him. When he put her down, he sobered, looking into her eyes. "I'm alive, Natalie. Finally, really and truly alive."

Looking at the beautiful smiling face, he had an urge to kiss her and never stop. He thought of the time when he came so close to kissing her, after the fear of losing her to the dating service murderer had driven him to express his feelings. Then, she had turned away. Was it fear of rousing his vampiric desires that caused her to turn away, or was it because she had not desire his attentions?

Deciding to find out, Nick drew her closer, watching for any sign of rejection. Finding only love shining in the brown eyes, he bent down and let his lips touch hers. The beauty of the kiss was almost too much to bear as her lips moved against his and her arms encircled his waist. He wanted to lose himself in her sweetness, in her loveliness. Knowing how close he had come to losing her forever made him treasure her all the more.

"How would you like to continue this in my apartment?" he whispered.

"Is that a proposition, Detective Knight?" she asked, teasing.

"I'd call it more of a proposal, Dr. Lambert."

Natalie looked at him as though trying to decide if he was joking. "A proposal?" she asked warily, "What sort of proposal?"

He was surprised to find that he had spoken the words, but, upon reflection, he found that he meant them. "Marry me, Natalie," he said, burying his hands in the silkiness of her hair. "I love you."

"Nick, I...think this is happening too soon. I..."

"Not too soon," he said softly, running his finger over the curve of her cheek as if memorizing its graceful line. "We've both known it since the beginning, haven't we? When you stood there, scared out of your wits, watching me drink that blood, you didn't run. You said I wasn't dead, that you wanted to help me become human. Your tenacity made me love you."

There was a shadow in her dark eyes, almost fear. "I don't want you to commit to something out of gratitude, Nick," she said, "and regret it later."

His lips twisted in a wry smile. "Regret," he said quietly, "is something I have lived with a very long time, and I know I won't regret this--unless I let you slip away."

"Nick, I..." Bowing her head, her voice seemed to fail her and he felt a terrible fear that she would reject him, that he had misjudged what she felt, that...

With a trembling hand, he lifted her head. A single tear fell from the brimming eyes. ***He had hurt her!*** He couldn't allow her to be in pain even if it meant giving up all of his hopes, his dreams.

"I'm sorry, Natalie. If you don't..."

"No," she interrupted. "Let me finish. I do..." she hesitated, swallowing, "love you, but I'm not sure why you want to exchange an eternal bond with evil for a legally binding contract with me. I'm not much of a dividend on immortality."

"I want to be the father of your children, to be your husband," his eyes softened as they held hers, "I want to grow old with you. Let me spend the rest of my days...and nights," he added, his voice deep with promise, "demonstrating how much I love you."

She looked at him, her eyes shining brightly, and finally nodded. Her lips sought his, and the melting of her body against his gave her answer clearer and sweeter than words could ever whisper.

Dawn would come in a few hours, bringing the first of many sunrises they would share as Nick left behind an existence of forever night.